

The American Indian Festival

September 23
to
October 13

By Lois Rubinyi

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The symbol of the American Indian Festival is shown on this month's cover. The design, from a Pima basket in the Museum's Grier Collection, represents the house of Siuhu, a Pima legendary figure whose mountain home was so hidden by confusing trails that no one could find him.



Rose Ayala, a volunteer at the American Indian Center, conducts a session of the Center's Community Services Day Camp. Photo by Orlando Cabanban.

TO BE ALONE in a large city—to be cut off from family, friends, land and, most importantly, from one's own identity—this is often the situation of the Indian who comes to Chicago. Indians have been arriving in Chicago in increasing numbers, from a few hundred in the early 1950's to the present population of 16,000. Many come as family units, but the largest number come alone. Many have come to participate in Bureau of Indian Affairs vocational training programs, but a number also come on their own.

Their existence largely unknown to the general Chicago public, these Indians from 99 tribes in 28 states and Canada have, nevertheless, a valuable contribution to make to the cultural and social life of this city. It was in this spirit that the idea for an American Indian Festival developed. A great deal of the creativity and ingenuity of mind, heart and hand that enabled these various Indian peoples to survive and flourish across much of the United States still remains. Since the culture of any people is often intimately related to the land where they live, it is not surprising that Indian cultures have changed even as the American landscape has been altered.

Few people see any continuity between the Indian cultures of the past and the present. Our image of the Indian past comes largely from novels (often highly romanticized), television, and films. The generalized Indian stereotype takes little cognizance of the great diversity of Indian cultures on the American continent, including vast differences in language, religion, government, art and social organization. Few people have had any contact with the Indians of today.

The American Indian Festival was conceived with the idea of providing a creative context in which person-to-person contact between Chicagoans—Indian and non-In-

dian—could take place. In creating the festival, the Museum is working with the American Indian Center. The Center, a non-profit organization, has sought by its own activities to preserve Indian culture. Most importantly, it provides a focal point for Indian social activity in the large city.

The Museum has long displayed some of the most beautiful creations of Indian cultures in its halls, but objects alone can never fully tell the story of their creation and creators. The emphasis of the festival is on living people and their work and its major theme is American Indian culture from past to present: continuity and change. Daily activities include demonstrations by Indian artists and craftsmen of skills from many cultures such as: totem pole carving from the Northwest Coast, basketry, beadwork, and costume making from the Plains and Woodlands, with related films on these crafts. Special events include performances by an Indian choral group, dancing, and a canoe race on Lake Michigan. Special exhibits will include a photographic essay on the Indians of Chicago and a display of traditional and modern Indian arts and crafts. The climax of the festival will come the last two days with a Pow Wow given by the Indians in which all Chicagoans—Indian and non-Indian—will participate.

Many of the festival activities relate to some aspect of Indian arts and crafts, but, most importantly, these are related to the total context of Indian life. Too often, Indian life both past and present has been devitalized by reducing it to a series of rudimentary skills and craft productions. The art of any people is a part of their culture and as such is intimately related to all aspects of their way of life. It reflects among other things, a particular view of the world, raw materials which are available, and the amount of leisure time a group of people has to pursue such interests. A

projectile point can be admired solely because of its fine workmanship, but how much more meaningful to us if we can see it as the means of supplying a people with meat to keep them from starvation. A clay pot may appear uninteresting until we realize that it has held life-giving water for the desert people who made it. We can then more deeply appreciate the meaning of the beautiful designs applied to the pot: billowing rain clouds, falling rain, rainbows, and tender young corn plants. The delightful juxtaposition of the utilitarian and the artistic can be a constant source of pleasure to discover. Watching a craftsman at work gathering his materials and working with them, one gains an increased respect for the extensive knowledge required for the production of these articles.

Change is an important theme in the festival. The way of life of any people is a dynamic ever-changing process. This was true of Indian cultures long before the Europeans came. Designs on early Indian pottery show much exchange of ideas between different groups of people. New techniques were also adopted—one very dramatic example being the art of weaving which was learned by the Navajos from the Pueblos. With the coming of the Europeans, changes came rapidly. New materials were adopted: glass beads were added to the traditional porcupine quill decoration of the Plains and Woodland Indians, silver was combined with the native turquoise to make Navajo jewelry, and wool from sheep brought by the Spaniards replaced the traditional cotton used in Navajo weaving. Shapes and uses of objects also changed. Rugs began to be made commercially by the Navajo as trade goods—design and color were often suggested by the trader. Metal containers were used by the Pueblo Indians for water storage and began to replace clay pots. Pottery began to be made more and more for tourists with new shapes and designs added to please the tourist's taste (which was often lamentable). Understand-

ably, the meanings and function of many articles changed. Kachina dolls are regarded by some as toys rather than as representations of Hopi dieties. Iroquois false-face masks are used in interior decorating in addition to traditional curing ceremonies.

Today it is not surprising to see an Indian dancer wearing moccasins with Woodland Indian beadwork, a Plains Indian costume, and a Navajo Squash Blossom necklace. The arts and crafts of many diverse culture areas in the United States are being brought together. There appears to be a search among many American Indians, as there is among other groups within the American population, for a common identity and the means to achieve this. Indian art, dance, and song have taken on new meaning in this search. It is important to stress, however, that this artistic heritage is only one aspect of the modern Indian self-image. As one young Indian expressed it:

The culture I am talking about is not something like a war bonnet and a pow wow dance put on for tourists. It's something that the Indian has in the way the Indian lives. Not as he lived in the past, but as he lives now. That exists in his *being* an Indian. (Stan Steiner, *The New Indians*, 156)

Chicago is fortunate that so many cultures and traditions are represented in her diverse population. It seems appropriate that the Museum which contains so much about people should be the major focal point for their meeting. It is our hope that the American Indian Festival will show the continuity through time of American Indian social life and culture and form a bridge between the past—represented by the articles on exhibit—to the present and future—represented by the people you will meet in the Museum.

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Pow-wows are held periodically at the American Indian Center, providing Indians from many tribes living in Chicago with a focal point for social activity. Photo by Orlando Cabanban.



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