

The Vases that Reveal America's Story: Identity, Industry, and Indigenous Design

By: Molly Newmister, 2024 Graduate Intern



The David Davis Mansion offers a compelling lens through which to examine the evolution of American identity and art culture during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. This transformation culminated in the creation and acquisition of two Indigenous-inspired vases circa 1900-1910, presumably purchased by George Perrin Davis or his wife, Ella. These vases embody the complex interplay between cultural fascination and fetishization, revealing how art both shaped and reflected American identity. By examining these pieces in their social and historical context,



we gain insight into the ways art, culture, and consumption intersected during a pivotal period of national growth and transformation.

America experienced a dramatic cultural turnover in the Gilded Age (1865-1897) and Progressive Era (1897-1920). While this young America had declared political freedom from Britain over a hundred years prior, it had not yet established a distinct cultural freedom free from the claws of European influence, and sought

to form a new identity that was purely American. Frederick Jackson Turner, in his essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, called the rapid extension of the Western frontier “the distinguishing feature of American life” (Turner, 1920, p. 4). Turner posited that as the American frontiersman “fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails,” he makes “a new product that is American” (Turner, 1920, p. 4), thus pivoting away from European influence into a crucible of Americanization. But, American identity, rooted in this growth, garnered anxieties as the mythic West—a place perceived as a haven where white Anglo-Saxons could escape the changing nation—dwindled, and—after the 1890 census—effectively ‘closed’ (Turner, 1920, p. 1).

With the frontier's closure and the West's accompanying decline, American identity entered a period of redefinition, shifting inward—yet paradoxically, also outward—toward the imagined “primitive” associated with Indigenous culture. In this cultural vacuum, Primitivism emerged at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries as both an aesthetic movement and a conceptual framework through which artists and intellectuals attempted to reconstruct a sense of authenticity. It sought to oppose industrialization in “the form of a positive discrimination in favor of so-called ‘primitive’ subjects and techniques” (Perry et al., 1993, p. 3). A component of the larger Modernist movement, Primitivism opposed the forces of Western urbanization inflicted by the First and Second Industrial Revolutions in America. By appropriating and romanticizing Indigenous cultures, Primitivism reflected America's shifting identity—no longer defined by the conquest of land, but by the aesthetic and ideological conquest of the “other.”

‘The noble savage,’ a central concept of Primitivist philosophy, is a direct fetishization of Indigenous culture. Fetishization as a concept has its roots in religious philosophy. In his 1760 work, *Du culte dieux fétiches* (‘On the Worship of Fetish Gods’), Charles de Brosses described fetishism as “a forceful reduction of all power to the material realm, creating the fetish as a tangible object that can be addressed and manipulated through a variety of actions” (Green, 2019). This act imports, superimposes, and absorbs that which it represents into itself, “erasing all traces of the represented.” The integrity of the fetish “depends on the fact that socioeconomic relations of production and distribution are erased from awareness” (Green, 2019), ensuring that the signifying function—what the fetish is representing—is no longer consciously recognized.

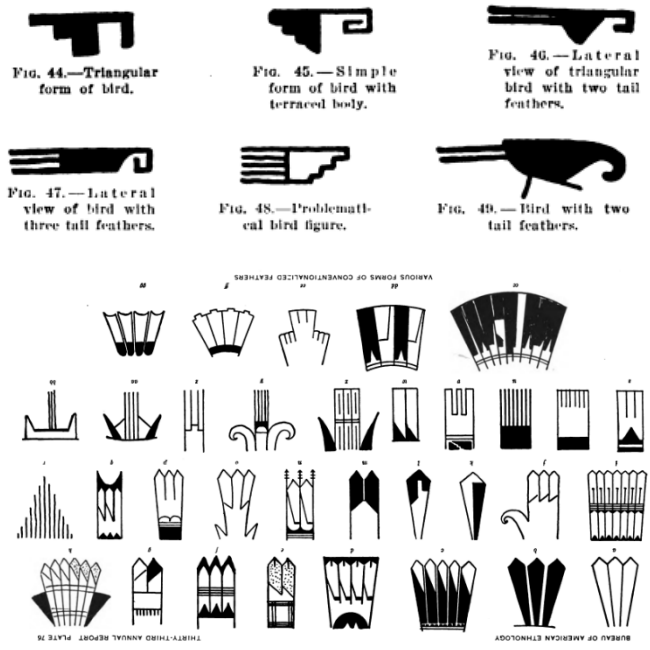
Primitivism and the “noble savage” trace back to Enlightenment-era philosophers such as Jean-Jaques Rousseau, who popularized these theories (Sarig, 2023, p. 2). The contradictory concept of noble savagery juxtaposes Romantic notions pitting the “pure” and “noble” Indian against the



“savagery” that “justifies (and perhaps requires) a campaign to eliminate [them]” (Deloria, 1998, p. 4). By viewing Indigenous art through a fetishized lens, primitivist works reduce dynamic, living cultures to static and unchanging representations, obscuring their complexity and evolution and thus pitting a static, revivalist ideal against a living, breathing culture.

Large-scale pottery manufacturers became instrumental in translating Indigenous-inspired aesthetics into mass-market commodities at the turn of the twentieth century. Among them were the Ohio-based Weller Pottery Company and its Souevo line, and the Bohemian firm Wilhelm Schiller and Son (present-day Czech Republic) and its SantaFe line, whose wares—still preserved in the David Davis Mansion—illustrate how industrial design participated in the broader Primitivist appropriation of Indigenous culture. The first vessel (*previous page, upper left*), produced by Weller, stands 8½ by 6¾ inches and is made of terracotta, an earthenware clay typically sourced from regional clay deposits. The vessel was slip-cast, a process in which liquified clay—slip—is poured into a mold, as evidenced by the vertical seams along each side. Its base is die-stamped “WELLER,” a mark used by the company from the late nineteenth century until 1925 (Kenefick, 2001). Painted in an off-white matte finish, the polychrome vessel is decorated with black painted designs of scalloped designs of scalloped arcs just below the rim, a repeating wing-like pattern, and checkerboard elements.

The second vessel (*previous page, lower right*), manufactured by Wilhelm Schiller and Son, measures 4½ by 7½ inches and is also made from terracotta. The vessel was formed using jiggering and jollying methods, as evidenced by a lateral seam that indicates its two-part construction in which a ball of clay is placed in a rotating plaster mold, while the jigger or jolly is a shaped arm—often called the ‘profile tool’—that shapes the surface of a ware, as the reverse side is formed by the contours of the mold itself (Hansen). The jiggering and jollying methods rose to fame in the 19th century with the invention of steam power during the Industrial Revolution, but truly became mainstream with William Boulton’s 1867 patent of a continuous rope-driven jigger, which was not only more cost-effective but also allowed for multiple wares to be shaped at once (Woodcroft, 1868). The base of the vessel bears the inscriptions “SANTA FE,” “AUSTRIA,” and “WS&S,” along with an emblem of two feathered figures—one on horseback with a spear, the other with a bow and arrow. Its surface features green, black, and rust-red painted designs in a repeating geometric sunburst design of triangular rays and checkered fills, S-shaped scrolls, and cross-hatched sections.



While industrial manufacturers produced these vessels, their decorative designs draw clear inspiration from Indigenous pottery traditions of the American Southwest, particularly those of the ancestral Hopi Pueblo. Polychrome vessels featuring curvilinear designs, concentric, four-way patterns, and sun, checkerboard, and bird motifs are some recurring themes in Pueblo pottery practices reflected in the vessels in question (Fewkes, 1919, p. 228). Such patterns—steeped in symbolic meaning and ritual significance for Indigenous communities—often represented elements of the natural and spiritual world. Among the most influential Indigenous artists of this era was Nampeyo of the Hopi-Tewa (*below, left*), whose traditional methodologies and techniques appealed to tourists’



“desire for an archaic authenticity” (Sarig, 2023, p. 8). Nampeyo’s work, characterized by bold geometric abstraction and the reanimation of ancestral imagery, established a visual vocabulary that was widely emulated and, in turn, appropriated by the American market. In this sense, the vessels function as intermediaries, translating Nampeyo’s and other Indigenous artists’ visual language into the industrially produced, primitivist-infused objects that circulated within American domestic spaces and which signified the greater shifting cultural identity.

The Indigenous-inspired vases housed in the David Davis Mansion embody more than decorative appeal; they reflect the cultural tensions of a nation negotiating its identity at the turn of the twentieth century. Through their industrial manufacture,

appropriated motifs, and placement within an elite domestic space, the vessels reveal how Primitivism translated Indigenous traditions into consumable symbols of authenticity for an anxious modern America. In this way, they stand as artifacts of both fascination and erasure—objects that illuminate how art, industry, and cultural desire converged to shape American identity during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

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