

Exploring Native Graphic Design

Neebinnaukzhik Southall



aniin! I am a member of the Chippewas of Rama First Nation, a mixed Native American-white graphic designer with a passion for Indigenous design. While studying graphic design at

Oregon State University, I knew few other Natives in my school's design program. I realized that I could not name a single prominent Native designer in the field. After further research, I did find several excellent, inspiring Native designers, but I realized how much the design industry in the United States and Canada is dominated by non-Native peoples. Native perspectives and experiences are left out, and this unbalance in a very ethnically diverse continent is symptomatic of greater ongoing social inequities.



It's vitally important that successful Indigenous graphic designers have a strong presence, especially in such a visual, media-saturated age. Skilled graphic design as practiced by Native people is an expression of Indigenous sovereignty. For much of US and Canadian history, Native visual and material cultures were suppressed as a way to undermine and attempt to eradicate Indigenous people. Native design can be and has been a way to positively carry our cultures with us into our everyday lives. While graphic design as a field has Asian and European roots, it can be a part of Indigenous cultural reclamation.

Native-made design has been used to promote positive Native identities, causes, and organizations. An excellent case in point includes the iconic posters and other design work created by Dwayne Bird (First Nations) and Andy Everson (K'omoks-Kwakwaka'wakw) in support of the Idle No More movement.



My choice to design with Native imagery has caused me to not only examine and better understand the different visual cultures of other tribes, but it has also led me to investigate my own people's visual history and culture and integrate into myself a deeper understanding of where I come from and who my people are. It's important for people to see that where they come from is creatively valuable and relevant.

Great graphic design is inspirational. For Native designers, wouldn't it be nice to quickly and easily find rich information about other Native designers? Wouldn't it be good to build on their insights and learn from them, instead of struggling alone? Wouldn't it be useful to have a supportive community to discuss unique design situations and challenges that non-Natives may not understand?



Native peoples should recognize, support, and nurture Native talent in the design field. Community is valued across Native cultures—Native

designers need a professional organization.

Recently, I asked Victor Pascual (Navajo-Mayan), a prominent graphic designer and the creative lead of DGTL/NVJO, about his insights and experiences relating to Natives and design. What I drew from that meeting is that such a professional organization is possible, and that he is also personally making efforts toward it, but it will take a lot of work, structure, and dedication. Can we make it happen?



We can build a stronger understanding of and insight into what we do. This column will provide a platform to bring greater visibility to Native graphic designers as well as to promote excellence in Native design. I'll share individual perspectives of designers, highlight all sorts of projects (whether typography, logo design, branding, layouts, or other projects), discuss how designers' tribal backgrounds influence the way they approach their work, and otherwise explore the visual, philosophical, and social implications of the intersection of Native cultures and graphic design.

If you are interested in sharing your perspective as a Native designer, please get in touch with me.

Chi-miigwetch.

www.neebin.com/nativedesign

Images: Angel DeCora (Ho-Chunk, 1871-1919)