



## ***Arctic/Amazon: Networks of Global Indigeneity Digital Resource Indigenous Art and Traditional Knowledge***

### **Digital Resource**

The Arctic/Amazon digital resource is a free educational tool, featuring an abridged version of the [Arctic/Amazon: Networks of Global Indigeneity](#) Epistolary Exchange and a series of four virtual Knowledge Exchange Workshops led by the two principal authors - Dr. Gerald McMaster and Dr. Nina Vincent. This PDF document is offered by Wapatah Centre for Indigenous Visual Knowledge as part of the publicly available digital resource and as a companion online tool accessible alongside the [Arctic/Amazon: Networks of Global Indigeneity](#) publication.

[Arctic/Amazon: Networks of Global Indigeneity](#) publication is an international collaboration focused on situating Amazonian and Circumpolar Arctic Indigenous artists, curators, and authors, addressing a wide range of topics, including how artists integrate sophisticated notions of spirituality, ancestral respect, traditional knowledge, political critique, and global Indigeneity in their practice. The publication is rooted in an Epistolary Exchange between co-authors Dr. Gerald McMaster and Dr. Nina Vincent, and includes written contributions from leading Indigenous voices from both regions, accompanied by a rich visual tapestry of images.

### **Citation**

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Image: Jaider Esbell, Installation view of *Entidades*, 2021, 34th Bienal de São Paulo, photograph by Levi Fanan



## Epistolary Five

### *Indigenous Art and Traditional Knowledge*

#### **Gerald McMaster**

Literary critic, Mary Louise Pratt writes of contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” In the Canadian Arctic, it was the outsiders or Southerners (qallunaat) who saw an opportunity: local artists could become the foundation of an economy. Inuit moving off the land could create artwork, which would be sold at Hudson Bay trading posts or co-ops. For the Eskimos of Alaska, they entered in an agreement with the US government that transferred land title to Indigenous corporations.<sup>1</sup>

For Sami, their situation demanded asserting a political voice through artistic practices. The art collective “Maze” originates from a town of the same name in Norway. They concerned themselves with Sami identity amidst augmented political circumstances in the late 1970s over the Norwegian government’s plan to build a dam on a river that ran through Sami territory. Very similar to Indigenous contemporary artists in Canada and the United States, Norwegian Sami artists began to expand their network reach by searching out to other Sami. Members of this group include Britta Markant-Labba, who was shown in Documenta in 2017; as well as the author Synnøve Persen, who was central to forming the Sami Artists Association.

Decades before Maze and others, the Norwegian Sami artist John Savio (1902-1938) made a profound impact. His life was cut short but not before leaving a sizable body of work, which was influenced by Western realism rather than Sami aesthetics. Nonetheless, it contains a Sami spirit of life and documents a time when modernity was impacting traditional ways.

The work of Andreas Alariesto (1900-1989) looked longingly at a Sami past that was being overtaken by modernity, evoking social sensibility or sociality. Some of his pieces are reminiscent of Kivatoruk Moses (1900-1982), who pictured Northern life with a sense of humour and ominousness, reflecting a time of change for Alaskan Indigenous peoples. There are scenes of interaction with Europeans, primarily Russians, and to local ceremonial life. His own personal experience was altered by a tragic accident that curtailed his life as a hunter. In place of it, he took up drawing, which became a successful and lucrative endeavour.

Contemporary artists from this period onward attended art schools in the mainland US. I

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<sup>1</sup> This landmark decision is called the “Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act” that was signed into law by President Richard Nixon in 1971.

remember going to school with John Kailukiak and Lawrence Ahvakana at the Institute of American Indian Arts in the 1970s, both continue to produce work. Artists were embarking on new directions in mask sculptures and two-dimensional works. Ron Senungetuk (1933-2020) is a well-known sculptor, in responding to the souvenir trade and the lack of serious consideration some artists were subject to for their inclusion in it, he said: “We want to be recognized as artists. We don’t want to be labeled as souvenir artists, which has been going on as long as colonization.”<sup>2</sup>

## Nina Vincent

Before colonization and the adoption of European languages and ideas, many Indigenous cultures did not have a particular word to designate art as a separate sphere of creative life. Everywhere there are original images, objects, shapes, sounds and body movements. These are created individually and collectively, learned and taught, exhibited, critically apprehended, and admired. Art is used by colonizers as a form of gatekeeping, to devalue the unique expressions of dynamic Indigenous peoples and to deny their creativity.

In Amerindian languages many words can be translated into English as “art,” but their meaning broadens the idea in the strictly Western sense, which in itself is a relatively recent linguistic construct. Most of these words are descriptive terms about their abilities, their material culture, creativity, visual knowledge and aesthetic structures. Yet all of them refer to aspects of the world and life that the Western idea of art would exclude from its limited scope and domain.

The Huni Kuin, who live within the Amazonian regions of Brazil and Peru, use the word *mimaxarabu* to refer to collective material production, whereas *kené* (a word present in Shipibo Konibo language as well) can be understood as “drawing.” The word *dami* can be translated into English as “image.” For the Tukano people, whose lands stretch from Colombia to Brazil, “*hóri*” designates the visions attained through traditional shamanic rituals and refers to the imagery and ornamentation applied on basketry, pottery, weaving and special and powerful wooden stools. For the Marubo people, *mev-revos-shovima-awe*, one of the words that can be used in translation for “art,” means work that emerges from the tip of the fingers. *Dzee’ka* is a term used by the Baniwa people to characterize the knowledge and ability to create something that is exclusively human made.<sup>3</sup>

There are many ways in which Indigenous creations are evaluated, criticized, praised and valued within the logic and taste of their own cultures. The idea of beauty is present in the Amazon and conceived of using different forms, representing the unique ethnic diversity of

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.32bienal.org.br/pt/post/o/3364/>

<sup>3</sup> These specific examples were gathered from a panel on the exhibition “Dja Guatá Porã” at MAR, Brazil.

the region. Commonly, beauty is associated with notions of “done well or properly” or “correctly made,” which emphasizes tradition and skillful ingenuity. It is also connected to the qualities acquired by the processes of making that engage the whole body and emotions. This notion is connected to the way in which something is created, which comprises the materials, who the artist is and where they are from, the forces present on them, and what the creation does, or is employed to do.

Westerners might call this an aesthetic lifestyle. It connects human action on many levels and provides a sense of creation and the maintenance of their world. In many Latin American Indigenous traditions this sensibility is called *el buen vivir*, an expression that expresses a constant pursuit of a balanced, fair and harmonic collective life. Doing things “in the right way” is the constructive process of creating objects of ritual and everyday use, building farms, houses and villages, even preparing food. It applies to the process of making children, of minding one’s thoughts and behavior. Everything can and should be done in a certain way, a “beautiful” way.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ACOSTA, Alberto. *El Buen Vivir: Sumak Kawsay, una oportunidad para imaginar otro mundo*. Icaria editorial, Ecuador, 2013.



*Arctic/Amazon: Networks of Global Indigeneity is an international collaboration and upcoming publication by Dr. Gerald McMaster (Canada) and Dr. Nina Vincent (Brazil), and includes written contributions from leading Indigenous voices from both regions.*

**Dr. Gerald McMaster**

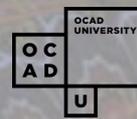
Co-author

Gerald McMaster, O.C., is one of Canada's most revered and esteemed academics. He is a curator, artist and author, and is currently professor and Tier 1 Canada Research Chair of Indigenous Visual Culture and Curatorial Practice at OCAD University, where he leads a team of researchers at the Wapatah Centre for Indigenous Visual Knowledge. He is nehiyaw (Plains Cree) and a citizen of the Siksika First Nation.

**Dr. Nina Vincent**

Co-author

Nina Vincent is a Brazilian anthropologist currently working at the National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN). Her work focuses on intangible heritage preservation, museum studies, intersection of contemporary art production and community partnership building, Indigenous art and knowledge, and cultural perceptions of nature and politics.



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