Indigenous Illustration: Native American Artists and Nineteenth-Century US Print Culture

Phillip H. Round

The relationship of Native communities to US print culture during the nineteenth century remains fairly obscure today, some 175 years after the Cherokee Phoenix first saw print in New Echota, Georgia in 1828. In this essay, I would like to focus on one aspect of that history that has received even less notice than movable type—pictorial illustration. The lack of attention paid to printed American Indian illustrations is even more difficult to explain than the lack of critical consideration directed toward early Native books, given that one of the common stereotypes attached to Native utterance is that Indians are image-oriented peoples. The general assumption is that if Native Americans had anything like writing at all, it was “picture writing”—to borrow a phrase from Garrick Mallery’s influential nineteenth-century study of pictographic systems in the western hemisphere. Even the spoken forms of Native semiotic production, early ethnographers theorized, were based on object, metaphor, and image.¹

In the rest of this essay, I will examine a few of the printed illustrated works produced by Native peoples in North America during the nineteenth century—either by Native individuals and their communities, or in collaboration with non-Natives. I will focus especially on illustrations of folktales and explore the relationship between images and texts that are written/printed versions of what would ordinarily have taken the form of oral performances. I conclude with a theorization of “indigenous illustration” that underscores those aspects of my examples that show how print illustration served Native cultural values or political

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objectives. I argue that many Native American printed illustrations from the nineteenth century represent bicultural representational practices emerging out of a desire to preserve oral and pictographic traditions and extend them into the new world of US print culture. Printed pictures offered many Native storytellers the opportunity to *recreate* traditional stories—rather than merely *repeat* them—with new technologies that ironically enacted “a righteous paracolonial presence” in performances that otherwise might have been misunderstood as simply nostalgic imitations of the past (Vizenor 77).

Any chronology of nineteenth-century American Indian cultural activities in the US must first grapple with the vastly different timelines or episteme that apply not only to the heterogeneous populations of people residing in the New World now routinely separated into the “Native” and the “non-Native,” but also the profound differences between the many Native groups themselves. For the purpose of clarity, I propose that the relationship of Native pictorial traditions to US print culture is best exposed by initially outlining (and simplifying) the interplay of two timelines in North American political and cultural history.

The first follows the development of print culture in the US. With the establishment of copyright in 1790, “the very meaning of public writing was transformed” (Rice 3). Literature became property and authors, “proprietors.” At the same time, for Euro-Americans across the US, reading became “a necessity of life” (Gilmore 1). The 1830s witnessed a “golden age of local publishing,” and for the first time in America there emerged a “fluid and multilayered marketplace for books” (Hall 43, 51). By the 1870s, a national market for magazines made authorship part of a new mass culture of machine-reproduced words and images. During the same period, American periodical and book illustration reached its high point, and lithographic firms like Currier and Ives produced hundreds of thousands of cheap reproductions of genre paintings and historical scenes. Brian Le Beau has argued that such images “were the leading source of popular culture in America” (2). Woodcuts also made a significant contribution to this popular culture of images. Sue Rainey points out that “prints made from woodblocks were a popular feature of the inexpensive, large-circulation newspapers and magazines . . . and their wide distribution made possible a common cultural experience that bridged class divisions” (7).

The second timeline traces relations between the US Federal Government and the several American Indian nations and includes the ratification of the US Constitution in 1788, the Removal Act of 1830, the establishment of the western reservations in the 1870s, and the forced relocation of Indian children into boarding schools
in the 1880s. In the year 1880, Osage scholar Robert Warrior has argued, “modern” American Indian intellectual history began. Plains artist Batiste Good marked that year on his Winter Count as the “sent the boys and girls to school winter.” It was also around this time that one of the first professional American Indian illustrators, the Winnebago artist Angel DeCora, began her career as a 12-year-old student at the Carlisle Indian School.2

Professional illustration in Indian Country is thus quite recent. Its origins, however, stretch back to European contact, when Native American graphic systems initially found their way into European print. Works like Thomas Harriot’s A Brief and True Report (1590), which is richly embellished with 28 engravings by Theodor de Bry, depict the graphic semiotic systems of the Native peoples of the regions. One image from this book, entitled “The Marckes of Sundrye of the Chief Men of Virginia,” is a particularly striking example of European engraving practices put to the service of reproducing Indian signs. This illustration depicts the tattooed body of a Native man with his back to the viewer, surrounding him with enlargements of several other tattoos collected by the artist from other tribal leaders. The body of the text functions as an extended caption that identifies the many marks with specific individuals in Virginia. Even the ornaments for this edition featured an image (albeit fanciful) of an Indian in headdress.

Not only did Indian graphic signs appear early and often in European print, but Native intellectuals from the beginning assisted in the production of printed works in Indian languages. In British North America, Wowaus, a Nipmuck convert who was educated at Harvard Indian College and was known to the English as James Printer, began collaborative work in Samuel Green’s Cambridge print shop as early as 1683.

The early collaboration between Native and non-Native print workers was not a one-sided affair. Anglo-American printers in the colonies found it necessary to accommodate the conventions of European print practice to Native discourse. They soon devised methods of reproducing Indian pictographs and name glyphs in their reprinting of treaties and the like. Thomas Fleet’s 1726 Boston edition of Samuel Penhallow’s The History of the Indian Wars, for example, reproduces the name glyphs of several Native leaders on many pages as an integral part of its semantic gestures toward veracity and truth-telling.

Although it was not until 1773 that an American Indian was credited with writing a book printed on a European press—this was Samson Occom’s Sermon on the Death of Moses Paul—the presence of Indian artistry and imagery in eighteenth-century
Euro-American texts is substantial. One of the most significant arenas for Native input into print during this period was in the area of cartography. The European cartographer of record, however, often silently elided Native contributions of facts and artistry. One of the more celebrated examples of such collaboration, which was essential to the mapping of early America, is Thomas Kitchin’s “A New Map of the Cherokee Nation” (1760), said to be “engraved from an Indian draught.”

Between the 1820s and 1860s, many Native communities began to employ printing presses for political and cultural ends. In 1828, as one of the first orders of business, the newly established Cherokee Nation obtained a printing press and types in the Sequoyah syllabary. The Choctaw followed soon after with a press of their own, and in 1848 began publishing The Choctaw Telegraph (later The Choctaw Intelligencer). In 1876, Samuel Bartlett informed missionary subscribers that by 1830 a “traveler would have found half the Cherokees in Georgia able to read,” and reported that some 14 million pages had been published for them in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In 1833, the Christian missionary Jotham Meeker established the Shawanoe Mission Press in the Indian Territory just west of Independence, Missouri. Not only was this the first press to publish a book in Indian territory, but it also produced many texts in Delaware, Shawnee, Ioway, and Choctaw, as well as the Siwinowe Kesibwi, the first all-Native-language newspaper published in the US. By 1851, the Dakota Mission began publishing Dakota Tawaxiku Kin [The Dakota Friend] on its press in St Paul, Minnesota. In Greenwood, Minnesota, around the same time, missionaries began printing another bilingual text, Iapi Oaye, the Word Carrier.

All of these newspapers, whether founded by tribal council decree or by a missionary body, employed Native editorial staff and press workers. In most cases, Native editors carefully crafted bilingual materials, and most featured Native-language letters to the editor written by literate members of the tribal communities the papers served. The Word Carrier is an especially salient example of how the introduction of moveable type printing to Native communities also potentially fostered new pictorial representational practices. Iapi Oaye fashioned itself as an illustrated monthly, much like Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper or Harper’s Weekly. Its title pages were graced by many highly skilled woodcuts of genre scenes produced for Anglo-American publications and sold later to the mission press. While local scenes and Native peoples were rarely depicted, one important exception was the illustration of a Dakota Christian meeting (see Figure 1)
produced by Alfred R. Waud, an English illustrator for Appleton’s *Picturesque America* who had earned his reputation drawing Civil War scenes. Waud probably executed this picture while traveling in 1872 to the Dakota Territory for *Picturesque America* (Rainey 307). By the second half of the nineteenth century, Native peoples from the Great Plains to the western coast of Greenland were beginning to collect and display pictorial illustrations and photographs like those found in the *Word Carrier* in their dwelling places.\(^5\)
At the same time that Native print and pictorial illustrations were flowing into local marketplaces from New Echota to St Paul, non-Native printers and publishers were proliferating negative images of American Indians. These print representations of Native peoples must be considered in tandem with “traditional” artistic practices as the other important context within which nineteenth-century Native illustrators and artists worked. The literature discussing imagery of Native savagery in the nineteenth century is too involved and prolific to engage fully here; suffice it to say that America was flooded with images of Native peoples that many Indians found wrong and wished to counter (see Figure 2).6

William Apess, the Pequot minister and activist, summed up the feeling of many American Indians in the period when he noted that, in 1830s America, Native peoples were surrounded by “monument[s] of the cruelty of those who came to improve the [Native] race and correct [its] errors” (277). In his introduction to the “Eulogy for King Philip,” Apess articulates the rage of a whole generation of Native Americans who had grown up surrounded by images of their own inhumanity. “My image is of God,” Apess declares, “I am not a beast” (278). Much indigenous illustration was no doubt produced in the same spirit as Apess’s remarks and represents a counterpoint to such Euro-American representational practices.

Taken together, the emergence of Native presses and print markets, combined with the explosion of mechanically reproduced Euro-American images of Indians, provided a fertile ground for new kinds of indigenous representational practices that merged traditional media and messages with new-found forms like lithography and woodcuts.

I would like to move now to two brief case studies of Indian illustration, one from either end of the nineteenth century. As I explore these illustrations and their creators, I will highlight the relationship between text and image, recalling that, as J. Hillis Miller has pointed out, in the European book illustration tradition, “a picture must plainly illustrate a story” (63). Yet, as Miller also observed, that relationship can be very slippery. Rejecting the traditional hermeneutics of book illustration, Miller has cogently inquired whether “the interpretation of pictures [has] been illicitly invaded by models of reading based too narrowly on the kind of meaning written words have?” (66). “Is there a mode of meaning specific to the graphic image,” Miller asks, “exceeding, supplementing, or lying beside any meaning that can be expressed in words?” (66). This is an especially relevant question for my attempt to come to terms with Native illustrations that may not be referring to a
written context at all. It is the bi-cultural, “supplementary” role of indigenous images that I would like to explore here.

One of the earliest examples of Native illustration occurs in David Cusick’s Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations (1848). Cusick’s book saw three antebellum editions and has been called a “neglected classic” (Judkins 26). It is a 35-page retelling of the Iroquois mythical and historical past that includes four plates...
probably produced by the author himself. Sharry Brydon notes that Cusick was well known to contemporaries for both his art and his writing. Thomas McKenny, director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, bought works of art from Cusick when he visited him in 1826. His narrative and woodcuts were not only locally known, but also nationally influential. They provided source material for many nineteenth-century accounts of the Iroquois, including Elias Johnson’s *Legends, Traditions, and Laws of the Iroquois* (1881) and—sometimes with substantial modification—Henry Rowe Schoolcraft’s *Historical and Statistical Information* (1851–57).

In this short pamphlet history, Cusick retells some 2800 years of Iroquois life, utilizing what anthropologists call a “time-linear-sequence” method of narration. Readers familiar with Iroquois creation and migration stories rate Cusick’s book as a very significant primary document in the ethnography. Even though it “translates story materials from the oral to the literary domain,” it also significantly employs “the power of traditional Iroquois symbolic imagery” (Judkins 33). Its “sketch” format, a popular genre of storytelling in nineteenth-century Anglo-America, is also “in keeping with the Iroquois symbolic economy of tales” (Judkins 33). Cusick’s book physically parses Iroquois history into three recognizably Iroquoian epochs—mirroring the more complex partitions of the Iroquois mythic canon that Christopher Vecsey outlines in *Imagining Ourselves Richly: Mythic Narratives of North American Indians* (1988). Cusick’s stories are shaped by the inflections of a nonstandard dialect into a complex weave in which tenses float and referents drift. By stylistic and structural standards, then, the book is clearly a hybrid bicultural production, with correspondingly complex bicultural rhetorical goals. An examination of its physical properties, including its illustrations, further confirms this.

The book’s title page and preface underscore the text’s hybridity. Cusick emphasizes that his work is both a product of personal intellectual effort (it is copyrighted, and its title affirms that this is “David Cusick’s History”) and community tradition. His preface portrays its author as a reluctant scout for what he hopes will be future generations of Indian authors, printers, and publishers. “I have been long waiting,” Cusick confesses, “that some of my people, who have received an English education, would have undertaken [this] work” (1). However, no one did, and so Cusick took it upon himself to complete the task. He was hesitant at first. As a Tuscarora, he represented only a secondary or dependant branch of the Six Nations. He was also self-conscious as a writer in English. The preface speaks of the great “pain” that Cusick experienced in collecting and translating the Iroquois oral
tales, and the author admits to some anxiety about calling these works “fables” (1). Yet the Six Nations remain “his people,” and at the end of his preface Cusick carefully notes that it was penned at “Tuscarora Village, June 10th, 1825” (1). Bibliographers disagree about what all this means, but it may reflect Cusick’s desire for his book to be read as a local (and Indian) work. If this is the case, then Cusick’s preface, title, and his decision to copyright his material all point toward what Robert Warrior has termed “intellectual sovereignty” (101)—a form of “cultural criticism that is grounded in American Indian experiences” and is akin to the tribal sovereignty that Native peoples in the US struggle to maintain each and every day (xxiii).8

Cusick’s woodcuts comprise an important part of his assertion of intellectual sovereignty. Added to the second and third editions of the text in 1827 and 1848, these illustrations, Sharry Brydon speculates, may have been made possible by revenues generated by the first edition. They are thus quite possibly a tangible product of Cusick’s attempt to maintain proprietary control over his work, at the same time that they represent his giving back to the community more of its own stories in the form of pictures that could be “read” by nonliterate members.9 Brydon also argues that Cusick’s woodcuts allowed him greater intellectual reach by enabling him to communicate the narrative “visually and to reproduce his art on a large scale” (63). The nineteenth-century New England historian Francis Parkman dismissed both Cusick’s narrative and illustrations as “rude.” I believe, however, that these cuts are neither unskilled nor without ethnographic merit.10 They must be judged according to the standards of the text itself—as “a statement of nineteenth-century Iroquois collective experience, constructed by an Iroquois intellect” (Judkins 32), much like the prophecies of Handsome Lake. I also agree with Russell Judkins that “the inclusion of the four illustrations, adding as it does the pictorial element, appeals simultaneously to both Iroquois and Euro-American audiences, and thus extends the bicultural character and appeal of the work” (35–36). The question is, how?

The first illustration in Cusick’s Ancient History, “The Flying Head Put to Flight,” portrays a “monster” that descended upon the newly established Five Nations of the Iroquois by night and devoured random villagers. The scene Cusick selects to illustrate comes from the section of his narrative in which an intrepid Iroquois woman foils the monster. “The old woman, who resided at Onondaga,” was abandoned by her frightened community (14). Cusick depicts her “setting near the fire parching acorns” as the monster approaches (14). Amazed that she appeared to “eat the coals of fire” (14), the monsters fled in terror (see Figure 3).
Cusick emphasizes this part of the story by selecting it for illustration and thus prompts the reader to explore its significance. Perhaps it is important because it features a strong woman. Strong women are a point of particular cultural pride for the Iroquois. Perhaps its significance lies in the way it underscores how a quotidian Iroquois practice—eating parched acorns—proves a powerful deterrent to outside threats. The “Flying Head Put to Flight” caption seems designed to clear up any ambiguity that the somewhat nontraditional images might elicit in a reader. As Hillis Miller would say, “words are necessary to indicate what story it is” (63).

In addition, this illustration establishes representational practices that will be common to all those in this book. The “rudeness” about which both Horatio Hale and Francis Parkman complained is perhaps evidenced in the minimal background embellishment and lack of perspective. Cusick employs a “ground line” to anchor his figures to the pictorial space. All the works in the volume feature figures in simple profile, although some include more narrative “action” than this one. The uniquely Iroquoian elements in the woodcut, aside from narrative context itself, may be seen most prominently in the face of the Flying Head, which appears to be modeled on Iroquois False Face carving traditions.¹¹

The most commonly reproduced illustration in Cusick’s History is entitled “Atotarho, a Famous War Chief Resided at Onondaga” (see Figure 4). The caption is decidedly terse, for Atotarho, the leader whose head is teeming with writhing snakes, is a pivotal figure in Iroquois stories recounting the founding of the Longhouse.¹² His transformation from a wantonly cruel and
manifestly evil figure into a supporter of peace and the Confederacy is central to the creation story of the nation. Yet Cusick’s illustration does not directly depict the moment of transfiguration, in which the Holder of the Heavens “combs the snakes” out of Atotarho’s hair. Instead, the somewhat static scene sensationalizes the medusa-like figure, while giving equal attention to a most quotidian image, the playful (or barking?) dog on the right.

It is perhaps in the tension between the marvelous hair and the common dog that we gain entry to some understanding of what Cusick’s illustrative efforts are all about. Unlike many traditional oral and ethnographic print renditions of the origins of the Longhouse, Cusick’s narrative and woodcuts do not emphasize politics (even if the two figures on the left do represent Hiawatha and Deganawida). They instead highlight the everyday—parching acorns, a frisking dog. Taken together, these elements of the figures belie the notion of Cusick’s detractors that his work is marginal or insignificant because it is full of “fables.” In fact, the way Cusick gingerly uses the word fables in his preface suggests that the tales are drawn from that part of the oral storytelling of the Iroquois that is less elevated than the story cycle associated with Hiawatha. Perhaps these versions of the stories are more appropriate for viewing by outsiders, such as the Euro-American audience for whom the print run was obviously in part directed. Cusick’s dog may also serve to ground the image in what Craig Womack calls the “mimetic function” of Native storytelling (16). Womack argues that Euro-American ethnographers also often elide the contemporary social and political discourse found in works from tribal oral tradition. Perhaps this dog is one of those “links between literature and social realities” that Womack describes as essential to understanding tribal perspectives on storytelling (16).

Judkins has commented that Cusick’s woodcuts recall traditional Iroquois pictographic representational practices, found on
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canes, war posts, wampum belts, and beadwork. Certainly, Cusick deliberately echoed False Face society carving practices. Yet we should be careful not to overemphasize this aspect of his work. Schoolcraft viewed Cusick’s illustrations as “a slightly modified form of pictography” (Brydon 65), but beneath that elision—“slightly modified”—lies the whole tale of what an indigenous craftsman and storyteller like Cusick was up to when he committed his images to print and his narrative to copyright. It is possible, too, that Cusick was exploiting the power of illustration that Miller calls “parabasis”—the power “to detach a moment from its temporal sequence and make it stand there in a perpetual non-present representational present, without a past or future” (66). In the context of indigenous illustration, however, we might wish to amend Miller’s comment to read: “a perpetual representational present that is full of both the past and the future.”

Cusick’s “slight modifications” thus invite scrutiny. They include important moments of agency—deciding which scenes to illustrate, carving the woodblocks from which the cuts were drawn, and providing descriptive captions. These activities were also “new.” None, with the exception perhaps of carving, were part of traditional Iroquois pictographic practice. Yet Cusick’s representational practices also differed in important ways from contemporary Anglo-American techniques. If we compare Cusick’s illustration of the Atotarho story with a chromolithograph based on Seth Eastman’s redrawing of Cusick’s original, the differences are readily apparent (see Figure 5). What Eastman’s image gains in raw color, it loses in the sinuous line of the original. Brydon has called Eastman’s figures “bulky,” and I agree. Without the dog, there is a different emphasis and order to the image, and the figure nearest Atotarho now seems to be crowding him. Moreover, the caption no longer locates Atotarho in a specific location (Onondaga) or identifies him with an honorific. He is here an ethnographic curiosity, an example, not a presence. In addition, the fine print below the illustration gives credit and proprietary privilege to Eastman and the Lippencott Company, without mention of Cusick or the Six Nations.14

In concluding this discussion of indigenous illustration practices and their relationship to nineteenth-century US print culture, I would like to consider a body of work drawn from perhaps the best-documented Native artistic tradition of the nineteenth century—Plains Indians ledger drawings. In the works of Silver Horn, the Kiowa artist who illustrated much of James Mooney’s ethnographic reporting on his tribe, we find yet another example of bicultural representational practices emerging out of a desire to preserve oral and pictographic traditions and extend them into the new world of US print culture.
Approximately 1000 of Silver Horn’s drawings have come down to us, their subject matter drawn primarily from the three basic genres of Plains pictorial art: “narrative art, visionary art, [and] record keeping” (Greene 11). Yet, as Candace Greene’s groundbreaking book, Silver Horn: Master Illustrator of the Kiowas (2001), has shown, one must employ a Kiowa-centered interpretive practice in order to appreciate the range of innovations the Kiowa artist engaged, as well as understand their meaning for the broader changes then going on in Kiowa society. Through her careful reading of Silver Horn’s work, Greene provides us with an exemplary method for assaying the illustration practices of other nineteenth-century Native artists who worked to mediate between traditional and printed images. In conclusion, then, I would like to summarize Greene’s observations and principles and apply them to the works of both Cusick and Silver Horn.

Greene’s first and most important point is that we must treat these artists as “professionals.” Her title gives its subject due respect: Silver Horn is both a “master” and “illustrator.” Next, we need to locate the artist within the specific local traditions within which he or she worked. Silver Horn was an inheritor of the original Plains pictorial tradition, a tradition that embodied several artistic conventions. The blank space of the buffalo hide, tepee cover, shield, or page contains no horizon or “setting” beyond
what is necessary to its specific story. The Plain pictorial tradition
also, however, demands that a great deal of specific personal and
historical detail be compressed into representations of leggings,
robes, coiffure, shields, and lances. It can also be a profoundly
narrative form, employing representational conventions—such as
the pattern of hoof marks—to denote the movement or direction of
the story it tells.

For Cusick, the all-consuming Six Nations fascination with
masking probably served a similar function as the Plains pictorial
tradition did for Silver Horn. Like Silver Horn, Cusick was forced
to transform a traditional practice to adapt it to Euro-American
print, transferring the ancient art of carving to a two-dimensional
paper surface for printing, and to the sequencing technology of the
codex. Yet contemporary observers, both Euro-American and
Indian, found something both “rude” and “new,” alien and cheri-
shed, in the images and text he produced.

Greene emphasizes that the Native artist’s personal life is
also important. She firmly locates Silver Horn’s pictorial work in
what Pierre Bourdieu would call his “habitus”—the local Kiowa
circumstances in which he produced his pictures. Silver Horn was
a member of a high-status family, a descendant of Tohausen, prin-
cipal chief of Kiowas from 1833 to 1864. He was a keeper of
several important cultural items, including the Tipi with Battle
Pictures and one of the Tsaidetalji medicine bundles. Art was at
the center of several of his and his family’s social duties within
their Kiowa community, including a regular renewal of artwork on
the Tipi with Battle Pictures. With these important contexts in
view, we are much better able to envision Sliver Horn’s artistry as
a complex weave of communal and personal vision.

Cusick was also a member of a high-status family, one that
had been associated with assimilation and translation since his
father’s day. It is interesting to reflect on the artistic practices of
Dennis Cusick, David’s brother, in this regard. Also schooled at
the Buffalo Creek Mission, Dennis chose to pursue a much more
Western form of artistic representation. Several of his most well-
known images are taken from a collection box for the mission and
depict Indian children at their lessons. Perhaps the first easel
painter among the Six Nations, Dennis Cusick’s career was cut
short by an early death, but his scant body of work nevertheless
indicates that he was guided by very different aesthetic practices
and goals than his brother. Much more interested than his brother
in “modeling” his figures, Dennis Cusick also sometimes cap-
tioned his images with Bible verse. David Cusick appears to have
taken up his project during a prolonged illness that disabled him
from participating in other labor for the community. Unlike his
brother, David turned to traditional images for his materials. It may be, then, that the translation of Six Nations stories he produced served as a personal recuperative practice, and that his later addition of illustrations similarly worked within a local system of healing that involved Iroquois representational practices associated with medicine societies and reaching back to the time before European contact.  

Greene expands her reading of Silver Horn’s artistic context from traditional practices and personal history outward toward the popular culture of America at large. She demonstrates how Silver Horn transformed the Plains graphic art traditions he had inherited as external circumstances demanded. When warfare was no longer the center of Kiowa life on the reservation, Silver Horn changed the focus of his own coup pictures, reflecting “a fundamental shift that was occurring in the Kiowa warrior art during the reservation period” (107). Silver Horn’s warrior art “became an illustration of war rather than an integral part of the war system” (107). When he met Edward Ayer Burbank in 1897, Silver Horn studied and adopted some of his naturalistic portraiture practices, but used them only occasionally and selectively throughout the rest of his career. When faced with the many opportunities posed by the new medium of an Army Target Record book or Euro-American blank ledger books in general, Silver Horn experimented with narrative sequencing, sometimes filling many pages with events that occurred in a narrative series, quite out of keeping with the Plains tradition of depicting unitary, discrete events. Greene believes that some of Silver Horn’s earliest experiments in ledger books, now housed at the Field Museum in Chicago, indicate that he was “fascinated with exploring concepts of sequential illustration” (144).

When offered money for his work, Silver Horn changed tactics yet again, putting as few pictures in a ledger book as were necessary to fill it, only on one side, and adopting naturalistic techniques of illustration if his patron demanded them. It is possible that the sequential nature of the Euro-American codex encouraged these improvisations, but it is also true that, in Plains ledger art of the period, the codex is itself re-imagined in new, often horizontal and nonsequential ways.

Like Silver Horn, David Cusick was probably motivated by several competing outside forces. Out of work, it is possible he needed money; the title of his book—*David Cusick’s History*—invokes the emerging capitalistic prerogative of authorship. Perhaps the illustrations added to later editions also served a market function, adding the allure of sensational images to an already sensational set of texts. While we do not have as complete
a record of Cusick’s artistic endeavors as we do of Silver Horn’s, we know that he worked in other media and produced at least one other version of “Stonish Giants,” a woodcut from the *Ancient History*. Placed side by side, the two versions of the Stonish Giants offer us a glimpse of other possible motivations for Cusick’s printed illustrations. While the illustration of the “Stonish Giant” from the *History* follows the same style as the other illustrations in that text, a version of this image included in Erminnie Smith’s *Myths of the Iroquois* (1883) provides much more narrative action and landscape detail. Unfortunately, Cusick receives no attribution and Smith provides no provenance for the image. The addition of much more ethnographic detail in this illustration and “Returning the Thanks to the Great Spirit,” another woodcut from Smith’s collection attributed to Cusick, invites us to consider whether or not Cusick produced these images for outsiders, community members, or a mixed readership. As more contextual clues come to light, we will be able to sharpen our appreciation of the kind of bi-cultural representational strategies Cusick engaged throughout his lifetime. Certainly even the scant information available at the present time suggests that Cusick was capable of adapting his illustration practices to suit different needs.

A similar examination of two versions of Silver Horn’s illustration of Kiowa folktales demonstrates similar adaptive practices at work. In the “Target Record” book he filled with images between 1891 and 1894 at Fort Sill, Silver Horn illustrated some scenes from the Kiowa “Saynday” trickster story cycle (see Figure 6). These images combine traditional Plains pictorial conventions (like the use of footprints to denote narrative “movement”) with the pictorial sequencing made possible by the Euro-American codex. Saynday stories had never been illustrated, but Silver Horn experimented with ways to make his pictures “supplements” to the oral stories his children remember him telling them when they were young.¹⁶ Perhaps they worked, as Miller says of European book illustration, as an “iconographic counter-text” to the oral story.

If Silver Horn’s watercolor illustrations of the Saynday stories did provide a countertext, however, they did so within a broader context of “publication” that stretched from a small manuscript reading circle to a potential national print audience. In 1897, General Hugh Scott commissioned Silver Horn to produce more pictures like the ones he made of Saynday for the Target Record book, this time for more general circulation. Under Scott’s influence, Greene believes, Silver Horn “produced . . . more complex illustration[s] by depicting several stages in the story in a single image” (74). Silver Horn even produced a set of illustrations on
plain paper, the kind “suitable for photomechanical reproduction” (158). Greene considers these works less like Plains traditional pictorial productions than any others in Silver Horn’s immense oeuvre, and suggests that he was trying to adopt “a Western mode of illustration to the traditional Kiowa stories” (153). Although these images were never printed, the way in which they were prepared for print—the role of Scott, the use of plain paper, the Western representational practices employed—all point to the many new choices and contexts available to Native artists in the nineteenth century.

The illustrations of traditional stories produced by Silver Horn and David Cusick demonstrate several things about how different Native artists, engaging in diverse indigenous representational practices at different points in the nineteenth century, met the challenges of print. In each case, both contemporary observers and recent critics note something “new” in the artists’ works. Yet as we have seen, the new can itself serve tradition. Following Dennis Tedlock, I would argue that indigenous illustration, like indigenous storytelling, involves “a recreation of a text, rather than a recitation” (qtd in Ridington 794). Indigenous illustration in nineteenth-century US print culture was also, as Miller says of book illustration in general, “constitutive rather than ... merely representational” (151). These works of indigenous illustration, in fact, bear witness to their immediate circumstances of production, and through them we may view the many acts of cultural improvisation that Native communities were making then and continue to make. These “circumstances of production” (what Greg Sarris would term their “intersubjectivity”) were often frankly commercial. Yet, adopting a phrase from Robert Warrior, I have called
this complex of motivations and meaning “intellectual sovereignty.” Rarely assimilationist gestures, these works of art are examples of what Gerald Vizenor calls “survivance”—embodying that complex mixture of survival and resistance that is central to Native American life.  

These modes of survivance are articulated, however, within the interpenetration of specific local concerns and local cultural practices and the increasingly invasive popular culture of Euro-American print. In the case of Cusick’s illustrations, the woodcuts may enact survivance by countering the distorting effect of English translation on the Longhouse origin stories. As his preface makes clear, Cusick was concerned with whether his mastery of English was sufficient to the task of translating Iroquois histories, and his addition of illustrations may be read as a desire to provide a much-needed supplement to the printed English version found in the first edition of his work. As Vizenor has observed, printed versions of oral traditions often “silence” stories by wresting them from their performative and participatory contexts and flattening out the resonance of tribal memories heard in Native language performance. Perhaps Cusick’s pictures offer a way around this problem, providing allusive depth and what Vizenor describes as both the “shadow” and “echo” necessary to the survivance of traditional folktales in print. (75).

For Silver Horn, the Saynday illustrations may tap into a specifically local and Kiowa version of what Vizenor has called “trickster hermeneutics.” The Saynday stories, full as they are of “the ironies of descent and racialism, transmutation, third gender, and themes of transformation,” offer the Kiowa artist a way out of the silencing translations of the literature of dominance (Vizenor 15). The most visceral proof of the supplementary and recuperative power of Silver Horn’s folktale drawings comes from the captions provided for them at the National Anthropological Archive. In the case of one illustration in the Target Record book [NAA MS 4252], for example, the archivist offers a cryptic caption “Indian flying through the air.” Yet Greene explains that the oral tale actually recounts that “Saynday is blown into the air by the force of his flatulence after eating a root that he has been warned against” (151).

By thus re-imagining nineteenth-century indigenous illustrations on their own terms, we may not only contextualize local practices, but also critique the prevailing interpretive paradigm by which Native printed illustrations are judged. Walter Benjamin’s description of the function of works of art in an age of mechanical reproduction has been applied rather indiscriminately to all works of art from the turn of the twentieth century, but as the forgoing
discussion of these Native illustrators demonstrates, Benjamin’s easy equation of mechanical reproduction to a process of de-mythologizing may not always apply. At one point in his famous essay, Benjamin makes a startling and unsettling claim, especially in the context of Native American practice: “technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual” (106). Stripped of this subservience, “art is revolutionized[,] . . . based on a different practice: politics” (106). Yet, as I think even these few examples I have offered demonstrate, it really is not quite that simple. There is a great deal of politics—even as strictly defined in Marxist theory—in Native illustration, mechanically produced or otherwise. Neither “primitive” nor “modern,” nineteenth-century indigenous illustration embodied a complex political stand both within and without Native communities. Often dismissed as “rude” by outsiders, indigenous illustration was life-sustaining to the artists themselves and the communities they served.

Notes

1. See Garrick Mallery, Picture-Writing of the American Indians (1894) and Daniel Brinton’s Aboriginal Authors and their Productions (1883). Brinton speaks of the Native Americans’ “lust zu fablerein” (10). In Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing, and Representation in North American Indian Texts (1991), David Murray explains the implications of this sort of linguistic theorizing for Native/non-Native relations. Reducing Native expression to “object” or “image,” Murray argues, does little more than essentialize difference and efface the “complex and various” nature of Native American textual expression in the first three centuries after European contact (27). Gerald Vizeonor echoes this critique in Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance (1994) and urges us to consider such “picture-writing” as “pictomyths” (100).

2. Although Robert Warrior and Batiste Good offer two Native perspectives that support this periodization of American Indian history, the recent literature on the dangers of collapsing the national and the local (along with the colonialist ramifications of such practices) is cautionary and instructive. For an excellent recent summary of the issues involved, see Philip Deloria, “Historiography,” in A Companion to American Indian History (2002), 6–24.


4. For a bibliography of Native newspapers in North America, see Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr and James W. Parins, American Indian and Alaska Native Newspapers and Periodicals (1983).


7. Vecsey lists 22 separate sections common to all known versions of the Iroquois stories concerning the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy (99–106). Although Cusick’s three-part breakdown is a greatly simplified version of the underlying story structures Vecsey cites, Cusick includes stories concerning two of the three central figures of these stories—Deganawida and Tadadaho (Atotarho). The main point I wish to make here is that Cusick was, I think, self-consciously employing the physical properties of his text to mirror the structural complexities and protocols of the Iroquois story tradition, but greatly simplifying it for practical as well as local cultural reasons. Few people know all the stories of their community, and many stories are “owned” by clans. Perhaps this is also what Cusick means to imply by the possessive in his book’s title: This is just David Cusick’s version of the story.

8. Robert Warrior’s Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions (1995) purposely avoids making a clear-cut definition of the term so that it can be conceived in terms of praxis rather than theory. Warrior does, however, make this case for how intellectual sovereignty operates, and it sounds very much like what we read in Cusick’s preface: “We, as critics, can find within such a praxis a way of making ourselves vulnerable to the wide array of pain, joy, oppression, celebration of contemporary American Indian community existence... Within that vulnerability we do not reduce intellectual production to mere aestheticism or functionalism... we see that the process of sovereignty, whether in the political or intellectual sphere, is not a matter of removing ourselves and our communities from the influences of the world we live in” (114). Cusick’s move in this text, then, is into the “modern” contemporary space that Iroquois peoples inhabited in 1827. This world was significantly impacted by print.

9. Brydon cites as evidence of the illustrations’ local value Schoolcraft’s observations about a Seneca man who held one of Cusick’s drawings in great reverence and had kept it safe for many years in his dwelling place (63).

10. In The Conspiracy of Pontiac (1870), Francis Parkman digresses in a footnote on the physical properties of David Cusick’s History: “Cusick was an old Tuscarora Indian, who, being disabled by an accident from active occupations, essayed to become the historian of his people, and produced a small pamphlet, written in a language almost unintelligible, and filled with a medley of traditions in which a few grains of truth are inextricably mixed with a tangle mass of
absurdities. He relates the monstrous legends of his people with an air of implicit faith, and traces the presiding sachems of the confederacy in regular descent from the first Atotarho downwards. His work, which was printed at the Tuscarora village, near Lewiston, in 1828, is illustrated by several rude engravings representing the Stone Giants, the Flying Heads, and other traditional monsters” (369).

11. False Face Society carving traditions are directed to the medicinal role of the society in Iroquois communities, and thus have much more specific and ceremonial purposes than are indicated by Cusick’s image. Stylistically, however, there seems to be a great deal of overlap in how the faces are represented in the carving of masks and how Cusick appears to have carved his woodcut face of the Flying Head. Another Cusick illustration, “Stonish Giants,” reflects a similar practice.

12. Atotarho also serves as a more general figure of Iroquois identity. See, for example, James Thomas Stevens’s poetry collection, Combing the Snakes from His Hair (2002).

13. Vecsey notes that “the Iroquois have three genres of narrative: (1) fictional tales (e.g. of tricksters); (2) recent human adventures; and (3) stories of true events that took place long ago, and which are believed by the narrators. The story of the Confederacy is part of the third category, which might be called ‘myth.’ There are three great myths of the Iroquois: (1) the Creation … (2) the founding of the League; and (3) the Good News revealed to Handsome Lake in 1800 and the years following” (98). Although Vecsey treats most of the stories from the foundation of the Confederacy as myth (“a foundational, ritualized, religious narrative”), he concedes that “as long as a century ago Iroquois storytellers were demythologizing the text” (98).

14. Interestingly, Peter C. Marzio cites the publication from which this image is taken—Henry R. Schoolcraft’s Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States (1851–57) as both “a milestone in anthropology” and a watershed moment in the history of chromolithography in America (29), but not because the chromos were good. It was precisely the failure of this multivolume collection to live up to its sought-after illustrative use of chromolithography that Marzio cites as evidence of the early technical difficulties of the medium and the complexities of government publishing in the mid-nineteenth century.


16. Greene tells us that Silver Horn was respectful of the Kiowa protocol that these stories be only told in the winter, and she speculates that his copying of the images must have been a practice that lay outside this prescription.


18. Anne Ruggles Gere has argued that DeCora’s art also exhibits Vizenor’s “survivance.” I wish to tease out some of the more subtle aspects of the term as
Vizenor employs it in *Manifest Manners*, both because it is in danger of becoming a jargon word with little critical value, and because not all Native illustrative practices engage survival and resistance in the same way.

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