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Have you been on or near an Indian reservation and become the proud owner of a concho belt, a squash blossom necklace or earrings, a beadwork purse, some linens, an Indian doll, or some other product representative of the resident Indian tribe? Are you sure that what you bought was a genuine handicraft of the Indians? It is easy to be fooled, and many manufacturers and dealers are getting rich by fooling you.

A special exhibit, "Indian Handicraft, the True and the False," on display in the Department of the Interior Museum at Washington, D. C., turns the spotlight on bogus Indian art.

In comparatively recent years, genuine Indian crafts have gained a growing popularity among the general public as more and more tourists and vacationers have traveled through so-called "Indian country", and as these crafts have appeared in shops and stores elsewhere.

Indian handicrafts began to be imitated as a profitable enterprise almost as soon as they created a market. Some Indians, of course, are pleased to cater to the "souvenir" penchant of many non-Indians by turning out cheap and virtually worthless wares as "Indian-made" curios. But the real competition--much of it unfair in the view of the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs-- stems from manufacturers and dealers who flood the market with imitations of Indian crafts from moccasins to linens to more expensive silver and gem-set jewelry, all mass-produced by machinery, much of it shipped in from Asiatic countries, and most passed off as the genuine Indian article.

"The American public, often unable to tell the difference between the genuine and the counterfeit, has unwittingly helped create a multimillion dollar industry in imitation Indian goods--an annual volume exceeding by far that of the genuine product," says Philleo Nash, Commissioner of Indian Affairs. "Not only are Indian citizens being denied a much-needed source of income, but they are being victimized by injustice and dishonesty which threaten the standards of fine Indian craftsmanship and the very existence of true Indian handicrafts. Moreover, the public is being cheated in dollars and cents and given a false idea of Indian arts and crafts."

Today Indian craftsmen are becoming increasingly proficient in the creation of imaginative and beautiful crafts. They are guided in the production of their crafts by their traders, their tribal arts and crafts guilds, and by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board of the Department of the Interior.

Probably the real heart of the imitation problem is that it is virtually impossible to copyright the individual Indian designs of the various crafts. Most Indian artists make up designs for each separate item of jewelry or other craft. The designs are purely imaginative, are not symbolic, and often have no particular Indian meaning. Even if Indian designs could be copyrighted, an imitator has only to alter a design in some trivial or minute way to avoid prosecution.

There is no law which prohibits the production or sale of imitations as long as they can be readily identified or recognized as such, but several States and the Federal Government have attempted by law to prevent the advertising or sale of imitations as genuine Indian products. The Federal law provides

heavy fines-- up to $2,000 and jail sentences for those who knowingly sell imitation Indian items as the genuine article.

It is not easy to prosecute under this law or the similar State laws because of the lack of evidence in many instances, says Commissioner Nash. The duped are generally removed by time and distance from the event by the time they discover they have been cheated. Some are not aware that they can bring legal action; others apparently are indifferent.

Manufacturers and dealers in imitation Indian crafts flourish under the most obvious misrepresentation and sometimes blatant false advertising. Genuine articles and imitations are often displayed side by side, or intermingled, with the hope that the public will think the entire display is genuine. The device of the price disguise is used to influence those who are aware of the higher costs of genuine Indian crafts. An exorbitant price tag is affixed to an imitation of little value to mislead the prospective customer into thinking he has spotted an authentic article, and can get it at a bargain, perhaps.

Misleading labels are an effective device for fooling the public: PI Indian Design," "Indian Style," middle in the Heart of Indian Country," "Indian Type Jewelry, II and other designations that suggest, but do not openly say, that an article is a genuine, hand-made Indian craft.

Jewelry is an item that lends itself readily to duplication and machine production, and some of the imitation Indian jewelry is extremely hard to detect from the authentic. The use of sterling silver and genuine, hand-cut stones may result in a product of monetary and aesthetic value. It does not, of course, have the authenticity which probably led the buyer to make the purchase in the first place, and which he has every right to expect.

Changes in the material content and design of genuine Indian silversmithing, however, have made it a bit easier to spot the counterfeit from the genuine. The best Indian silversmiths use heavier silver than that used 15 or 20 years ago, and they have departed from the highly decorated, ornate pieces favored by the buying public before World War II. Today their designs are simple and clean lined in accordance with the Indian preference. The imitators, in many cases, seem not to have caught onto this departure yet, and many continue to turn out articles of lightweight metal with elaborate designs. Dealers often try to convince prospective purchasers that the design is a complex Indian symbol which "tells a story. If it does not.

The turquoise used by the Indian lapidarist, of whom the Zuni is considered most proficient, adds to the general confusion because of the colors and variety of the gem in its natural state. Zuni workers are true artists in cutting, polishing, matching and setting gems, and they work with coral, jet and shell as well as turquoise. But turquoise remains the most popular stone, and blue turquoise, preferred by the Indians, also is preferred by most non-Indian purchasers. The turquoise ranges from deep blue to deep green and some think the green shades are inferior stones. Actually, the color has no relation to the quality of the gem. Adding to the value of the stones, however, is the matrix, or design, formed by streaks of other metals in the gem, which make the "spider web", an effect that is highly prized.

Turquoise is easily duplicated in plastics, and some of the false stones are almost indistinguishable from the real gems. Some manufacturers also use a poor grade of turquoise which has been treated by oil or water baths to give it a temporary luster or sheen. In time, this dulls and "grays out."

In addition to the Indian jewelry of silver and turquoise, one of the most abused Indian crafts in forgeries and imitations is the beadwork of the Woodland and Plains Indians. This is being duplicated

and shipped into the United States by the ton, mainly from Hong Kong, where it can be produced far cheaper than the American Indians can make it. The Asiatic producers have obtained samples of Indian designs and they are swamping the American curio market with beadwork belts, cigarette cases, purses and other articles, says Commissioner Nash.

Indian handcrafted baskets have come in for some duplication by producers and importers from other countries, but the distinctiveness of Indian designs and the high quality of Indian workmanship in basketry have made this craft less a victim of the imitator.

Navajo rugs and Pueblo pottery, too, are less vulnerable to the imitation market because they cannot be duplicated easily by machine methods to produce an inferior product at cheaper prices. The main exploitation of Pueblo pottery is done by some Indians who have lowered their standards to meet a tourist demand for small curio or souvenir articles. Their products are low-grade pots whose colors are put on with show card paint after firing. The finest Indian pottery is painted before firing with colors made permanent by being burned in through firing in a natural kiln.

Some manufacturers of blankets have produced coverings in Indian designs and often called their products "Indian blankest but generally only the most gullible are fooled. The Navajos do not make blankets, but produce varieties of rugs which are distinctive and identifiable with the type of weave, coloration and design. Depending upon their design, size, and coloration, they are used as wall tapestry or floor coverings.

Mr. Nash points out that there are many honest dealers in imitation Indian goods who indicate by proper labeling and by verbal explanation that their wares are not genuine Indian handicrafts. Unfortunately, some dealers in imitation Indian goods are as unable as their customers to tell the real from the false, and may themselves be the victims of false advertising.

"The best protection against trickery in the purchase of Indian crafts is a thorough knowledge of the characteristics of fine craftsmanship as originated by Indian artisans," says Nash. It was with this in mind that the Arts and Crafts Board assembled its True and False exhibit in the Department of the Interior Museum, where many Washington, D. C., visitors and residents drop in daily. But even experts can be fooled by some of the imitations being turned out today, so there are good tips for everyone to follow to avoid being duped and cheated in the purchase of Indian products:

1. Buy only from a dealer whose reputation for honesty and for handling authentic Indian goods is above reproach. Local inquiry can generally establish who these dealers are. As a rule, they will be the tribal guilds, the traders on the reservations, or dealers whose business reputation is based on the sale of only authentic crafts of the highest quality. The latter is likely to be an expert on Indian crafts, and he will get his wares directly from the craftsman or from a source he knows to be absolutely reliable.
2. In cases where the dealer's reputation cannot be easily or conveniently established, your best safeguard is to ask some rather pointed questions. Ask the dealer if the piece is handmade by an Indian; ask him where it was made; obtain the name of the artist and get the name of the tribe to which he belongs. Write down the answers.
3. If you purchase the item, ask for a receipt and the dealer's written certification that the article is, to the best of his knowledge, handmade by an Indian and of genuine materials. No honest dealer will refuse this request. If you find later that a dealer's personal certification is false, so advise the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, Department of the Interior, Washington 25, D. C., and send along

your purchase so that the Board may refer it to the appropriate district attorney for legal action.

4. Look for labels that guarantee authenticity and do not be taken in by those which may have a misleading implication. Mail order purchases should be questioned as thoroughly as those made personally, and a dealer's certification of authenticity obtained.

"Indian craftsmen fear an increasing loss of income from their work, and fear also that continued sale of the cheap imitations will result in lowered respect for true Indian craft," Commissioner Nash says.

"Only the buying public can remedy the situation, by being hard to fool, and firm in demanding genuine Indian crafts of the highest quality. Then those producing forgeries and imitations no longer will find it profitable to deal in duplicity or duplication."