Ishi, the Last Wild Indian, 2001
David P. Bradley, White Earth Ojibwe (1954 - )

Peabody Essex Museum
Salem in History, 2006
Ishi, the Last Wild Indian, 2001
David P. Bradley, White Earth Ojibwe (1954 - )
Santa Fe, N.M.
Mixed Media on Board
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. James N. Krebs, 2001
E301825

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ishi (c.1860-1916) was the last living member of the Yahi tribe, the southernmost tribe of the Yana people who inhabited northern California and the Sacramento Valley. The California gold rush and influx of foreigners contributed to the quick demise of the Yana tribes through conflict and disease.

Apparently the last surviving Yahi, Ishi journeyed into white society, and was brought to the Museum of Anthropology in San Francisco by anthropologist Alfred Lewis Kroeber. He worked as both a janitor and as a “living exhibit,” making arrowheads in front of paying museum visitors and helping researchers record the Yana language. This survivor did not divulge information about his deceased family, however, and he did not even reveal his own name. “Ishi” means “man” in Yana. The mysterious person known as Ishi did in 1916, a victim of tuberculosis, which was foreign to the Yahi.

Rumors spread that Ishi’s brain had been preserved after his death, but it wasn’t until 1999 that his pickled brain was found in a Smithsonian museum warehouse. This prompted much controversy and political debate. The Smithsonian agreed to return Ishi’s brain to surviving Native American tribes closely related to the Yahi, and it was buried with Ishi’s body in 2000.

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A Native American from California himself, David Bradley is known for artwork that often conveys a political message about Native Americans, drawing from folk art, art historical, and pop art symbols and resources for his pieces.

In this work, Bradley uses old scientific and journalistic photographs, a California license plate, his own drawing and paintings, and words in the Yahi language to convey the story and contemporary debate surrounding Ishi. In particular, the realistically painted double portrait at the top of the work communicates the artist’s message – on the left, a colorful, healthy Ishi in a mountainous landscape; on the right, a black and white Ishi, tired and worn within an industrial cityscape.

SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Identify the images objects that Bradley used in this work.
- What are their relationship to Ishi’s life?
- What other kinds of objects might the artist have used to communicate Ishi’s culture and experience?
- What is the artist’s message about Ishi?

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Read excerpts from books written about Ishi, such as Ishi in Two Worlds by Theodora Kroeber (1961) or Ishi’s Brain: In Search of America’s Last “Wild Indian” by Orin Starn (2004). Each book presents a different perspective on Ishi’s story. Compare and contrast information and points of view represented by the painting and the books – can we know which is the “real” story?
- Ask students to come up with their own cultural/historical story to tell through mixed media, such as newspaper clippings, photographs, drawings, and found objects. When their projects are complete, ask them to share their stories.

2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks 1.8, 4.15, 5.34, USI.23, USI.26, USII.4