

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Biographical Directory of Native American Painters. Edited by Patrick D. Lester.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8vb006q3>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Berlo, Janet Catherine

Publication Date

1996-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

The Biographical Directory of Native American Painters. Edited by Patrick D. Lester. Tulsa: Servant Educational and Research Foundation (distributed by the University of Oklahoma Press), 1995. 701 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

In 1968, the Museum of the American Indian published *American Indian Painters: A Biographical Directory*, compiled by Jeanne Snodgrass. It was the first reference work to list substantial biographical information on more than a thousand native artists working in the field of painting, rather than in so-called traditional Indian arts. Assembled by the curator of Indian art at the Philbrook Museum, it has long been the main resource for historical information on native painters from 1875 to the mid-1960s. The enormous volume under review here, encompassing data on some three thousand individuals, is the successor to that groundbreaking work.

Because Snodgrass's book is out of print, the editor has chosen to include all the artists referenced there (whether or not they maintained their professional accomplishment in the visual arts). Again following Snodgrass, the editor begins the study of native painting with Plains Indian graphic artists of the nineteenth century, starting with Four Bears and Yellow Feather, whose works were collected by Prince Maximilian during expeditions on the upper Missouri River in the 1830s. Most of the Southern Plains artists incarcerated at Fort Marion, Florida, in the 1870s are included, as well as other early graphic artists like Four Horns and Silverhorn. However, most of the individuals in the book are twentieth-century artists.

The editor has been careful to include alternate names for artists who have them. The above-mentioned Yellow Feather, for example, is also listed under his Mandan name Sikchida, and the Kiowa artist Silverhorn is listed under several variant spellings of Haungooah as well. Eskimo artists who are sometimes known principally by their first names, such as Kenojuak and Pudlo, are listed under both their first and last names. Oddly enough, one of the renowned Navajo artists, best known by the name in the title of his biography, *Hosteem Klah* (F.J. Newcomb, University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), is listed only as "Big Lefthanded," and Newcomb's important artistic biography is omitted from the bibliography.

Although the book is not illustrated, save for dark, postage-stamp sized details at the beginning of each letter of the alphabet,

one welcome feature is the column of quotes about artists that runs down the side of each page. A sentence or two provides some biographical or stylistic data about the artist. Unfortunately, these sometimes are not cited properly, so that the author is not given proper credit. A quote about the artist Big Horse (p. 65), taken from an article by Candace Greene about the artists of Fort Reno and Fort Supply, is credited anonymously to *American Indian Art Magazine*, 1992, and Greene's fine study does not appear in the bibliography.

Much of the information about contemporary artists was provided by the artists themselves. The data include tribal affiliation, birth and death dates, residence, education, occupation, publications, exhibits and/or collections, and awards and honors. For some artists, only the highlights of their careers are given. Publication citations often are not given in full, but usually enough information is provided so that some further bibliographic research is possible. Recent important works such as E. Maurer's *Visions of the People* (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1992) and Archuleta's and Strickland's *Shared Visions* (Heard Museum, 1991) were combed for information on older artists.

One of the book's unfortunate major flaws is its complete lack of rigor in the choice of artists to be included. The preface states that "the only criteria for inclusion are that the artist consider himself or herself to be Native American and be actively seeking a career as a painter" (p. x). So the reader is presented with hundreds of entries on individuals who, aside from this volume, are completely unknown in the world of contemporary native art. The inclusion of scores of contemporary self-proclaimed painters with few exhibits and even fewer credentials is of questionable value. I recognize the difficulty in determining equitable bases for inclusion, but the abdication of this responsibility seems absurd; the result is a volume that stands halfway between a vanity publication for some of the artists and a scholarly one for others, and a volume that is much bigger and more expensive than it needs to be.

The editor and his assistant Ginger Kingman (who probably should have been listed as coauthor, since, according to the introduction, she conducted "the majority of research" and "was responsible for organizing and compiling most of the data," p. x) are to be commended for their inclusion of many Canadian Native artists, including many Inuit printmakers. No doubt some of these artists might well object to their designation as "Native American

painters." The editor should have chosen the designation "Native North American" in the title to signal the greater inclusiveness of this reference work. And of course, some of the artists listed, including almost all of the Canadian Inuit artists, many contemporary Northwest Coast artists, and the nineteenth-century Plains ledger artists, are not painters at all but graphic artists who work in media such as drawing or printmaking.

Despite these criticisms, this is an extremely worthwhile volume for the amount of useful information included within its covers. The flaws I have indicated are typical of ambitious reference works in which no editor can possibly control all factual material, bibliography, alternate spellings, and significant data. The fact that such a publication is outdated even before publication points out the need for an easily accessible and instantly updatable electronic database on native artists. The Inuit Art Documentation Center at Canada's Department of Indian and Northern Affairs maintains such a database on Inuit artists. It certainly is time for an American institution, such as the National Museum of the American Indian, to take on the responsibility for creating such a reference tool. Until that happens, however, this book fills a large gap in the reference literature on Native American art of the last century.

Janet Catherine Berlo
University of Missouri—St. Louis

Earth Line and Morning—Star Nlaka'pamux Clothing Traditions. By Leslie H. Tepper. Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994. 137 pages.

From the Land—Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing. By Judy Thompson. Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994. 134 pages.

Sanatujut—Pride in Women's Work: Copper and Caribou Inuit Clothing Traditions. By Judy Hall, Jill Oakes, and Sally Qimmiu'naaq Webster. Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994. 136 pages.

Each book in this trilogy published by the Canadian Museum of Civilization focuses on clothing traditions, but the specific re-