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## Book Reviews

**Sacred Circles: Two Thousand Years of North American Indian Art.** By Ralph T. Coe. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978. 260 pp. pap. \$12.95.

**Native American Art in the Denver Art Museum.** By Richard Conn. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979. 352 pp. pap. \$20.00.

*Sacred Circles* is the catalog of an exhibition of Native American art which originated as an English celebration of the U.S. Bicentennial. Transplanted, it became a minor episode in the sequence of "blockbuster" shows which marched through the United States during the 1970s. Lenders included many of the great ethnographical museums of the Western world. The project was under the patronage of H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, and of Nelson Rockefeller, then Vice President of the United States. The list of benefactors, donors, contributors, friends, etc., runs to three pages of small print.

Some eight hundred of the most important known works of Native American art were presented in London late in 1977. Subsequently, with the exception of a small number of exhibits, the show travelled to Kansas City, and the London catalog was expanded to include pieces added for that installation. This expanded version — the book at hand — was published for general distribution by the University of Washington Press. In many ways it is rather more of a book, incorporating as it does illustrations and discussions of pieces added for the Kansas City showing. Notable among these is the famous tubular stone "Adena pipe," never previously shown outside Ohio, and a number of early Alaskan and Southwestern objects. Plates have been added in color as well as in black and white, and the quality of reproduction is good, comparable to the London version. The book contains an introduction, glossary, time-chart, ethnic maps, bibliography (five pages of very fine print), and six chapters, each followed by the relevant catalog section: "Archaeological Earthworks

and Effigy Pipes: The Serpent Cult"; "Woodland Art in the Historic Period"; "Ivory Madonnas, Bear Cults and Shamans' Visions: Eskimo Art and Archaeology"; "The Grandeur of Northwest Coast Sculpture"; "The Plains Indians: An Aesthetic of Mobility"; and "Pastoral Designs for the Arid Lands: The Art of the Southwest and the Far West." The book concludes with a catalog of a selection of photographs by Edward Curtis (with a brief appreciation of his work), and another of a group of paintings, prints, and other visual documents of historical interest included in the exhibition. Surprisingly, only a few examples of this latter group of materials were illustrated in the book.

The Denver publication is described as the largest ever produced by the Museum. It was not conceived as a catalog, despite its resemblance to one, nor as a general survey of Native American art. Rather, through presentation of a selection of 500 of the museum's collection of some 15,000 Native American artifacts, the book "is intended to demonstrate the chronological and geographical breadth of representation of American Indian arts and especially the exceptionally high artistic quality of a large number of individual works." It begins with a finely detailed ethnographic map and a brief "Introduction and Appreciation" of Native American art. Then follow ten sections organized on a regional basis and a one-page "Selected Bibliography." In contrast to *Sacred Circles*, where the vast majority of photographs are in the neighborhood of 2" x 2", the illustrations are large and clear, with good resolution of detail and range of contrast, and a more varied and satisfying layout.

At the outset, the University of Washington Press must be applauded for making these books available to a much wider audience than they would otherwise have reached. As the heavily illustrated and thoroughly documented records of a major loan show on the one hand, and of key works from an outstanding museum collection on the other, they add significantly to the "critical mass" of primary data available to students. Yet they also reveal a number of salient — and not entirely positive — aspects of the current state of the field. These include persistent romanticism and other intrusions of Western attitudes; the lingering divergence of art historical and anthropological approaches to Native American art where a synthesis is clearly necessary; the vast amounts of primary

material remaining unpublished or inadequately published; and finally, the problems posed by the idiosyncratic nature of many — or even most — categories of Native American art: comparatively little painting or sculpture of sorts comparable to present-day Western conventions, and little of that conforming to prevailing patterns of taste.

My initial impression of *Sacred Circles* was one of delight at the visual feast it seemed to offer; the apparent abundance of new information and the promise of insight were there for later delectation. This impression began to fade with a closer examination of its format: page after page of illustrations the size of large postage-stamps. Any sense of relish vanished altogether upon a close reading of the text, which epitomizes for this reader the essentially "old-fashioned" art historical approach to Native American art: fundamentally superficial and impressionistic, and ambitious to the point of arrogance. We read (p. iv) that Coe's "intention in assembling the exhibition has been to establish the art of the North American Indian as one of the great artistic expressions of the world." The book (p. 9) proclaims that "The day when American Indian Art could be dismissed as unartistic and provincial is over"; acknowledging that while a "definitive" exhibition is impossible, this one aims at being encyclopaedic, "just at that moment when North American Indian art joins the mainstream of art history." Such tub-thumping might serve a useful ideological purpose in persuading partisans that the battle is won, but a cursory survey of the main art history journals, university programs, research fellowships, and other indices of individual and institutional commitments by art historians would suggest that Coe's claim is invalid. Such scholarly interest and activity as is evident seems still to be primarily among anthropologists and archaeologists, with the manipulations of private collectors and museum specialists (primarily in the commercial sector) giving the appearance of an involvement by academic or other professional art historians.

Certain aspects of the design of the *Sacred Circles* project are appealing, timely, and useful. For example, Coe intentionally included more examples of certain traditions less well known (e.g. Athabascan from western Canada; Mimbres ceramic vessels) and fewer of those better known and more frequently illustrated (e.g. Plains; modern Pueblo ceramics). Further, in

addition to "outstanding examples," he included more modest objects "that shed light on their culture." This latter impulse, however praiseworthy, highlights two related questions which continue to vex students of the arts who turn their attention to cultures which developed outside the Euro-American orbit. First, it has become something of a cliché — but a persuasive one — to say (as Coe implies) that "masterpieces" generally tell us more about the category of "masterpieces" than about the culture which produced them. As much or more than other traditions, however, one senses that accidents of preservation may so skew our perceptions of the normative and the exceptional in Native American art as to reduce this proposition to meaninglessness. Second, comparatively modest "objects of daily use" — such as a spoon or a moccasin — while generally characterized by distinctive form or decoration, are not usually intrinsically "precious" or imposing by virtue of size, material, motif, or workmanship. Presented without an indication of context, they tend to take on a forlorn and pathetic quality. Inclusion of actual field-photographs (fairly numerous in Coe's catalogue) helps to mitigate this problem, but available collections are woefully meagre for this purpose. (Alternatively, an artificial context can be created for the objects through the use of models or mannequins in an abstract or realistic setting, but such simulations rarely are truly evocative, much less persuasive.

*Sacred Circles* is flawed by a mannered, almost histrionic style, and recurrent combinations of hyperbole, sweeping generalization, and *non sequitur*. On page 12, for example, following an essentially gratuitous and irrelevant acknowledgement of cannibalism and torture among Native American people, one reads: "Despite this no one can deny the strength of Indian culture and art or his mystical sense of union with nature." Or that (p. 54) the Choctaw "were a relatively chaste people, and offered themselves for punishment according to a complex system of retribution . . ." There are many others, to the point that the reader comes to suspect that overtones of mysticism and mystification are not necessarily properties of the artworks or of the cultures which produced them; more likely, they derive from the author's syntax and ideology. Unrestrained — some might say irresponsible — diffusionism enters from time to time, as in the author's hints of Asian affinities for "Old Copper Culture" artifacts (p. 53) or his

seeing traces of Shang bronzes in a 19th c. Penobscot beaded collar (p. 78); the often repeated but never substantiated "connection" between the prehistoric southeastern United States and pre-Columbian Mexico is frequently evoked, as in Coe's chronicle (p. 57) of

"the migration of the slope-shouldered concave sided pot. Donald Lathrop has recently pointed out that the ancient trade between Ecuador and the Pacific coast of Mexico eventually implanted this pottery form into Mexico, where one sees it in Tlatilco wares. The story can be carried still further; the final home of this type of ware was in Arkansas, about 1400 - 1600 A.D. where the shape of the pots is actually accordion-sided. Caddoan dog effigy pots from Louisiana and Arkansas may well owe something to Mexican Colima predecessors . . ."

How this relationship came about is, of course, not discussed. Conclusions reached on the basis of impressionistic stylistic judgements abound, such as the author's characterization of these same prehistoric southeasterners as "dour people, obsessed with their cults," (p. 58) or his quite extraordinary explanation (p. 57) of why he finds Hopewell animal effigy pipes "remote and cold as works of art":

"When the early hunters crossed from Siberia over twenty thousand years ago, they lost a sense of continuity with their previous culture which explains why their prehistoric art retains a primordial and stylized character, a quality of the beginning of art. This disorientation with regard to time persisted until 1500."

— when it was replaced, one presumes, by an even more profound disorientation brought on by the arrival of Europeans.

Although the gross divisions of his catalog reflect groupings which have become more or less conventional in the field, Coe has, on balance, lost the battle of organization. *Sacred Circles* is an almost indeterminate mass of material, lacking any real sense of contour and structure. The basis of sequences within the catalog sections is never explained, and ethnic groups are intermingled within each, producing an effect of homogenization antithetical to art historical discourse. One's impression is

that Coe's discussions of societies known ethnographically tend to be more moderate and more useful than those based on archaeological materials; his section on the Plains and the Southwest are fresh and straightforward. They are free of the interpretive excesses which flaw his discussion of the Southeast, for example. (On the other hand, even in the chapter on the Southwest, the Navajo and Pueblo peoples are lumped together, and California receives less than one page of text.) There are more editorial lapses than one would expect of such a lavish undertaking: among others, on p. 10, a Potawatomi medicine man is pictured as "pouring over his prescription sticks"; on p. 109, one learns that the Eskimo preferred to work in "walrus and bone ivory"; on p. 211, Datsolalee's skill in basketry is marked by "taughtness of weave."

Politics and special interests appear to have impinged upon *Sacred Circles* in interesting ways. One John White, prominently identified as "a Cherokee scholar of the Chickamauga band, and a descendant of Dragging Canoe the American Revolutionary War Chief," appears to have been the only Native American associated with the project in any substantive capacity; as "Director of Educational Programs," he "organized a series of specific performances by Native American dancers and artists . . . in order to confirm the presence of the living American Indian culture as a permanent and creative factor in the present day." Intriguingly, in addition to spectacular exhibits such as the Adena pipe, the Kansas City installation of *Sacred Circles* (as embodied in the addendum to the catalog) saw the inclusion of a rather large number of pieces from local public collections — such as a rather unimpressive group of Modoc baskets from the Kansas City Museum of History and Science somehow considered worthy of a color plate. Interesting but generally unexceptional pieces from certain private collections were also numerous in the Kansas City addendum.

The Denver Art Museum, as a public institution, seems (at least nominally) able to avoid overt pressures of the sort apparently operative at Kansas City. The primacy of "quality, taste, and selectivity" in determining selections for the book at hand is frequently reiterated, but I suspect that many readers will find this claim at variance with some of the pieces themselves. For example, I should probably admit to a traditionalists discomfort with certain categories of present day Native American art-production — such as modern

Eskimo stone and ivory carvings. Nevertheless, I doubt that even connoisseurs of that genre (if there be such) would place a high artistic value on the examples included here. The usual allegations of Mesoamerican influence in the Mississippi Valley are repeated (p. 23), and there are other debates which could be joined. The sections devoted to illustrations from each region flow logically from each to the next, but somewhat clearer divisions and some indication of the basis for the particular sequences used — the “plan” of the book — would have been helpful.

Despite a certain ponderousness of tone, the book is well and carefully edited, and, in particular, Conn has dealt sensitively with the question of how to present “objects of daily use.” Some are shown in isolation, to be appreciated for their formal qualities, others as parts of ensembles on mannequins or human models; a Crow saddle and other gear are depicted on a living horse (no. 183), a Blackfeet lodge (no. 176) erected in an actual landscape. But there are no people in these scenes, and the human dimension is generally elusive. Throughout, emphasis is on details of construction and technique; styles and substyles and their interrelationships; and how designs were developed from their constituent elements. There is a great deal of hard information here, but symbolism, function, and context are little discussed.

In approach as well as in content, then, the Denver book aims to be neither “definitive” nor “encyclopaedic.” It is, in other words, a useful and well-executed but limited museological treatise of a sort familiar in the literature of anthropology. Beyond its superb photography, excellent layout, and generally high production values, I suspect that its main appeal will be to specialists of a similar persuasion.

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