

***Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women's Dresses.* Emil Her Many Horses, ed. New York: HarperCollins in Association with the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2007. 160 pp.\***

Reviewed by Laura Peers

This study is part of a series on Native American material culture produced by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. Accompanying an exhibition of the same name, this volume brings together scholarly research and personal perspectives in a way that allows these different approaches to enhance each other. Essays by Emil Her Many Horses, Colleen Cutschall, and Janet Berlo provide a strong framework for excerpts from interviews with tribal dressmakers who acted as consultants for the book and whose very articulate statements add tremendously to the essays.

Emil Her Many Horses begins with a careful exploration of the construction and meanings of sidefold and 2- and 3-hide dresses. Along the way, he discusses cloth dresses, the use of saved-list cloth and of extravagant fringes, and the centrality of family and spirituality in the construction, gifting, and wearing of dresses. Colleen Cutschall, artist and daughter of a Lakota fashion designer, explores women's spirituality and its material expression in dresses (including a rare published discussion of the reasons for not handling sacred items during menstruation, p. 77) and sacred dresses, such as society and Ghost Dance dresses. Art historian Janet Berlo brings together recent scholarship on aesthetics, "tradition" and adaptation, tribal trade networks, the circulation of trade goods, and the histories of adoption of foreign goods: the ways that cloth, beads, brass tacks and coins, not to mention rhinestones and sequins, have been made into deeply meaningful traditional dresses. She also discusses the paradox that the most elaborately beaded dresses were produced during the period of most coercive assimilation policies in the late 19th century, as "subversively defiant responses" (p. 130) to assimilation. Many of the quotes from Native dress makers and wearers across the volume make clear the fact that tribal identities have survived and are joyfully celebrated through the processes of making and wearing these powerful garments.

The essays are lucidly written, and often poignant. While intended to be widely accessible, this is not an intellectually lightweight book (and its contributors certainly are not). Given that this work, rather than earlier scholarly ones, may come to be a standard reference, especially in tribal homes and public libraries, a few additional references would have strengthened it and pointed the way for interested readers. Many readers, for instance, will be unaware how early scissors, knives, beads, and cloth were available in different regions, so printing part of an early trade inventory for a northern Plains post (rather than just referencing one, as the book does) would be useful in understanding how 19th century garments were made. Equally, many garment makers have never had the opportunity to study early garments, so providing more of a description or interview surrounding one such learning session would have been thought-provoking. A list of early dresses to be found in collections other than the Smithsonian's would provide artists and

---

\* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

makers with research possibilities for which many hunger. Finally, I find it intriguing that there is no discussion of hide tanning in the book. All but one of the contemporary hide dresses illustrated and discussed look to be made of commercially tanned hide, which does not breathe or move in the same way as home-tanned. There is no mention of the decline of tanning traditions in most tribal communities or the loss of embodied spiritual relations with animals (or women's traditions) that this potentially entails.

The most fascinating material in the book is often the quotes by tribal dressmakers describing what it is like to wear these dresses, to be given them (or have to give them up), to design and make them, what their meanings were and are, how they are woven into and across the complex cultural identities of contemporary tribal women with traditional perspectives. I was especially struck by the final words of the dressmakers who get up at 4:00 in the morning to pursue their calling and bead in the quiet hours. It is this very strong, often very personal material combined with strong essays from the contributors that makes the book so successful.

*Focusing on relations between North American tribal communities and UK museums, Laura Peers is a curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum and a lecturer in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Oxford University. She is the author of Playing Ourselves: Interpreting Native Histories at Historic Reconstructions (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007) and (with Alison Brown and members of the Kainai Nation) Pictures Bring Us Messages: Sinaakssiiksi Aohtsimaahpihkookiyaawa: Photographs and Histories from the Kainai Nation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). She is the editor (with Alison Brown) of Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader (New York: Routledge, 2003).*