

***Native American Voices on Identity, Art and Culture: Objects of Everlasting Esteem.* Lucy Fowler Williams, William Wierzbowski, and Robert W. Purcel, editors. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2005. 220 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Jason Baird Jackson

This is a useful and compelling book. *Native American Voices on Identity, Art and Culture's* style is accessible but dignified; its format is that of a serious but enjoyable coffee-table book. The photographs and printing are well executed and the book has several qualities that recommend it to scholars in the field of museum anthropology, particularly those whose work connects them to American Indian communities and collections.

Seventy-eight color plates, each picturing one or more items of Native North American material culture from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (UPM) share the book's central stage with 58 different Native North American artists, scholars and intellectuals, each of whom reflects in a page or less of text (via an essay, reflection, poem, or personal narrative) upon the chosen object or objects and the book's larger themes, which include art, history, resistance, ancestors, deities, and biography. (Some contributors are paired with more than one image, accounting for the two figures.) The objects and the narratives are typically compelling, occasionally arresting, frequently enlightening.

To convey a taste of the work, readers are, for example, shown (verso) an image (with catalog details) of four wooden combs collected by Frank G. Speck among the North Carolina Cherokee and offered (recto) a brief poem (titled "Naming") on the theme of combs as manifestation of love by Diane Glancy, an author and educator with ties to the Oklahoma Cherokee (pp. 104-105). Exemplifying a more conventional didactic narrative, Lakota anthropologist Beatrice Medicine, whose recent passing occurred soon after this volume was published, interprets the use and significance of a beaded woman's robe collected among her people in the late 19th century (pp. 130-131). Similarly, Choctaw archaeologist Joe Watkins reflects upon four Clovis and Folsom points recovered from the Blackwater Draw Site in Clovis, New Mexico (pp. 190-191), while Tlingit scholar, author and playwright Nora Marks Dauenhauer, discusses the clan history and social significance of the Two Door House Tunic, revealing along the way the history of its initial fashioning, its successive refashionings, after multiple disappearances from the community, and its eventual rediscovery in, in these three instantiations, collections outside Tlingit country, including the UPM example whose image is the starting point for her essay (pp. 188-189).

While diverse in community affiliation, occupation and orientation toward the significance of museums and museum collections, the contributors are all established and well-known figures in some sector of Native North American arts and letters, thus the perspectives represented are skewed away from those that might be found in a more representative sample of American Indian people.[1] The project organizers and editors, Lucy Fowler Williams, William

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Wierzbowski, and Robert W. Preucel, all of the UPM American Section, acknowledge and describe the practical constraints within which the volume was assembled (pp. 10-12). They had hoped to invite a significant range of collaborators to the museum for firsthand study of the objects, but financial limitations meant that only a dozen such visits were accomplished and that most of the objects were selected by the editors and commented upon via images and correspondence.

Having sketched the place of the UPM in a wider, sometimes problematic, history of anthropological research and museological practice, the editors observe that “this book seeks to situate ethnographic objects within contemporary Native American discourse as a way of emphasizing their enduring significance (p. 10). The goal, seen through a conception of the current era as one marked by the emergence of museum-source community collaboration, is framed using the interpretive language of the “social life of things” and by five section groupings viewed by the editors as unifying themes emergent in the many commentaries: “Hands--Acts of Creation,” “Hearts--Compassion and Strength in History and Resistance,” “Spirits--Guidance from Ancestors and Deities,” “Footsteps--Biography and Life Experience,” and “Eyes--Looking Forward for Future Generations.”

This volume will see regular use for a number of reasons. Through its paired narratives and images, it enhances scholarly knowledge of the particular objects presented, and of the genres and peoples with whom these are associated. It thus expands the documentary record in useful ways. As a sampler of the UPM North American holdings, the volume is also a valuable resource for scholars, although it is biased in the direction of artistic masterworks and high profile specimens. The editors' introductory essay provides useful background on the history of the museum's work in Native North America, and it, along with UPM Director Richard M. Leventhal's “Foreword,” sketches the directions that the museum would like to pursue in its future engagements with Native American people and communities.

The matter is beyond the scope of a review such as this, but I would be eager to see the field of museum anthropology systematically consider the ways that volumes such as this one, built first and foremost, around an original collection of Native American narratives, are used in small- and medium-scale exhibition-making projects. Works like this, along with such things as artist's statements, Indian Arts and Crafts Board brochures, and classic ethnographic text collections are all regularly used as sources for interpretive-textual material by curators wishing to diffuse a no-longer-welcome authoritative and monolithic curatorial voice, but who lack the means of consulting effectively with relevant Native American source communities. Such simulated dialogical presentation is even common in large, better-resourced museums working with American Indian materials and I suspect that such a technique is also used elsewhere in the representation of other kinds of source communities. I am not condemning this practice, only suggesting that it remains incompletely acknowledged and rather unexamined in both the critical and methodological literatures. Just as this volume's editors seek to track changing understandings of the objects in their curatorial care, across space and time, museum anthropology would be usefully served if we could consider the new uses to which the narratives and knowledge assembled in *Native American Voices on Identity, Art and Culture*, and works like it, will be put.

Note

1. In drawing upon a pool of available native scholars and intellectuals, the organizers privileged those most able to craft accessible and compelling responses in fluent standard English. They also turned to people who are particularly accessible to, and amenable to, such projects. The difficulties that would attend to a similar effort aimed at engaging a wider assortment of consultants on a continent-wide basis would be nearly insurmountable, but thinking about such an undertaking is a valuable thought experiment, especially if one imagines including people who are utterly hostile to museums or who are completely unfamiliar with them, in addition to sampling the broader, and staggering, diversity--cultural, social, educational, linguistic, economic, religious, class, gender, sexual orientation--characteristic of Indian Country today.

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