

***War Paintings of the Tsuu T'ina Nation.* Arni Brownstone. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2015. 143 pp. [Published in cooperation with the American Indian Studies Research Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington.]\***

Reviewed by Alison K. Brown

Arni Brownstone's study of Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee) war paintings is a valuable addition to scholarship on the artistic traditions of the peoples of the North American Plains. The book focuses on the development of Tsuu T'ina war art over a period of some 150 years and is based on meticulous visual analysis of pictographic painting found in museum collections in the United States and Canada, including on tipi liners and on story robes. By carefully comparing the styles of the artists who executed the imagery on five key examples, Brownstone draws useful conclusions about how and why these particular items were produced and collected, and offers insights into the wider social and historical contexts in which Tsuu T'ina art developed. Moreover, his ability to relate the heroic war deeds depicted in archival and other evidence, and the care he takes to identify some of the artists (an extraordinarily difficult task) enliven these works and draws attention to Tsuu T'ina individuals and their histories, which are generally less well-known than those of neighboring nations.

The book begins with a brief chapter that introduces the Tsuu T'ina people. Although their reserve is presently located alongside Calgary in southern Alberta, Canada, in the eighteenth century the Tsuu T'ina moved south onto the Plains from the subarctic as a result of Cree expansion into their territory. The chapter examines their relationship with other nations following this move, such as with their Blackfoot allies, the Crees, and Gros Ventres, and situates these relations within the context of the emergent fur trade. Access to trade goods, weapons, and horses, as well as competition over territory and food supplies during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, meant that this era was characterized by chronic warfare. In the second chapter, Brownstone summarizes how ethnohistorians and other scholars, as well as fur traders, have written about this warfare and how associated military strategy came to dominate Plains society. Their writing has identified characteristics such as competitiveness, honor, individualism, and generosity as traits that Plains men should aspire to. This chapter provides the social context for understanding how and why war art emerged when it did, and this theme is continued in the exceptionally rich third chapter, "War Exploit Painting," which looks in depth at the practice of biographical pictographic painting on the Plains, and how artists responded to internal and external influences over time. Having established the artistic, technical, and historical contexts for the production of Tsuu T'ina war art, Brownstone then shifts to a close analysis of the five paintings that form the centerpiece of the study. Though the extent of surviving documentation tracing the histories of production and acquisition of each work varies, Brownstone has established that they were probably produced through the mediation of George Hodgson, an interpreter on the Tsuu T'ina reserve during the first decade of the twentieth century. Given the push for ethnographic salvage that dominated this era, it is likely that each of the paintings was commissioned by non-Natives. Brownstone tells us (39) that the motivation for their production "was, in part, to enrich the Tsuu T'ina ethnographic record," and that "certain

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European conventions” were introduced “into an otherwise indigenous art form” which enabled the viewers to better “read” the images depicted. Each painting is discussed in depth, and Brownstone effectively shows how different artists—two of whom are identified by name—represented the same event. Extremely helpful charts and other aids are presented throughout the text which enable a visual presentation of the findings, and include a comparative rendition of how horses were drawn (44) and a chart depicting the distribution of specific warriors across the five paintings (46). Indeed, the illustrations and production quality is excellent throughout.

The chapter on pictographic translations reminds the reader of how conventions of recording history differed between Europeans and Plains Indians and examines the attempts that have been made to decipher pictographic war records. The chapter then brings together written translations of the events depicted on the five paintings with annotated pictorial counterparts. The final chapter considers the wider spectrum of Tsuu T’ina material culture by summarizing the contents of a number of Tsuu T’ina collections that the author examined as part of the focused study on war art. The chapter is perhaps most useful for providing contextual information on histories of collecting Tsuu T’ina objects in the early twentieth century, and for reproducing ethnographic documentation on women’s designs (109). If I have any criticism at all of the book, it is that this chapter would have benefited from a more nuanced examination of how the social conditions and transformations experienced by the Tsuu T’ina people in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century affected collecting. It is noted that the reserve population had dwindled to just 205 individuals by 1901, which included some ten Blackfoot and twenty Crees (107; 110), however, a more explicit statement of just how threatened this community was at the time the war paintings and other items were acquired might have been helpful for readers less familiar with this traumatic period of Tsuu T’ina history.

Overall, this book has much to offer researchers interested in the development of war, of Plains society, and of war art in particular. In my view, it is also an extremely useful study in methodology and artifact-centered research. As Heidi Bohaker (2014) has noted, pictographic writing, which can be found on a range of museum artifacts, can offer unique insights into indigenous forms of literacy. Accordingly, incorporating these indigenous authored records into the range of material we use to examine the past has implications for expanding the indigenous archive in new and exciting ways. Brownstone’s insights into how Tsuu T’ina pictographic records can be used to reflect upon historical experiences is a model of the value of close, comparative study of collections, and sits very well with other recent publications on Plains warriors and their artistic traditions (e.g., Dempsey 2007; Carocci 2012).

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