

Arapaho Women's Quillwork: Motion, Life, and Creativity.* Jeffrey D. Anderson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013. 205 pp.

Reviewed by Marsha C. Bol

Jeffrey Anderson writes about quillwork embroidered by Northern and Southern Arapaho women, an art form that is no longer created. Nor is there any effort among Arapaho people to revive it. He tells a story from 1990 when he was at Wind River Reservation, Wyoming, attending a quillworking workshop taught by Alice New Holy Blue Legs, a renowned traditional Lakota quillworker. Anderson noticed that among the eight women who had come to learn how to do quillwork, not a single native-born Arapaho woman was there. All were from other tribes, married to Arapaho men or staff at Wind River. Coincidentally, a few years after Anderson's research I was having a conversation with Alice New Holy at her home on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. She told me a story about being invited to give a quillwork workshop at Wind River and indicated her surprise that no Arapaho women came to learn the art technique that had died out in their culture. New Holy was perplexed about the women's absence and, hence, their lack of interest in reviving their quillwork tradition. As Anderson tells us,

Throughout the history of contact, the meaning of quillwork has changed for Arapaho people. It has moved from a core sacred tradition for generating life to lost sacred tradition among others, such as the age-grade lodges, that must not be revived or renewed, because the succession of knowledge from generation to generation has been irreversibly broken. [165]

The history of the study of Arapaho quillwork is star-studded with well-known anthropologists, including Alfred Kroeber and George Dorsey, who recorded lengthy field notes and published their findings on this tradition in the early twentieth century. Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss also wrote about Arapaho quillwork. At the same time, Kroeber and Dorsey collected specimens for some of the large U.S. natural history museums, including the American Museum of Natural History, the Field Museum, and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Anderson spent over six years examining hundreds of Arapaho quillwork objects in these and other collections, plus more unpublished manuscripts, letters, and other documents than any other scholar has ever attempted to uncover. This research, in combination with his twenty-five years of fieldwork and continuing relationships with Arapaho people, demonstrates the author's deep experience in this area.

As a result, I submit that Anderson has written the seminal work on Arapaho quillwork, an area that has been much neglected for over one hundred years, since the last anthropologists of the founding generation left the field. He has unraveled and made comprehensible the work of Kroeber and Dorsey, whose publications have perplexed me and others for many years, so much so that we have been tempted to discount their value. He has given serious attention to an entirely women's art form in a field where the focus has been consistently on Plains Indian men's endeavors.

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In addition, he has added to the scholarship of material culture with an exemplary model for examining “human creativity,” by approaching it in multiple ways. In the lengthy and rich Introduction, Anderson introduces us to the concept of “movement” or “motion” in quillwork, a theme that runs throughout the volume. “Women vowed quillwork projects ... as gifts that would help relatives make the right transitions in life or overcome difficult times along the road of life through all the four hills of life” (15). In other words, quillwork is a “visual prayer” intended to make others’ movement in life easier.

In Chapters one and two, Anderson reviews the field notes and published material of Alfred Kroeber and George Dorsey on the most sacred quilled objects—cradles, tipi ornaments, robes, and leanback covers. Like other anthropologists of their time, both Kroeber and Dorsey employed an Arapaho assistant, Cleaver Warden, to accompany them, translate, and sometimes undertake the interviews solo after they had left the field. One of Anderson’s aims is to let Cleaver Warden’s voice, as a member of the community, be heard, whereas neither Kroeber nor Dorsey ever fully acknowledged Warden’s critical role in the research.

In the chapters that follow, the author presents quillwork’s “many paths to meaning” by discussing the design elements that carry multiple meanings, investigating the central role of quillwork in Arapaho myths, and the social and cultural importance of quillwork throughout the life cycle or “life movement” of the makers and the recipients of the quilled objects. The author then places this art form into the context of Arapaho history, concluding, “it is clear that quillwork was present and instrumental in almost all life transitions and ceremonial lodges. Quillwork artists were indeed primary actors” (144).

The number of Arapaho quilled objects in collections remains small compared to other Plains tribes, such as the Lakota nation. In part this is because Arapaho women never made quillwork for intertribal exchange or sale to outsiders, but also because this art form ceased to be made quite early. By the late 1890s, Southern Arapaho quillwork was rarely seen and the Northern Arapahos were doing only a small amount up until the early 1900s. Yet, as Anderson points out, there is more ethnographic evidence about Arapaho quillwork, as well as associated mythological and ritual traditions, than for other Plains groups.

Anderson has tackled a subject that is not currently fashionable as an anthropological research topic. Native American material culture collected by anthropologists in the discipline’s early years has faded from vogue. This author, who has built lengthy and lasting relationships within the Arapaho community, is to be commended for delving deep into this subject with new eyes, using twenty-first century anthropological tools.

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