

***Plains Indian Art: The Pioneering Works of John C. Ewers.* Jane Ewers Robinson, ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011. 224 pp.\***

Reviewed by Daniel C. Swan

This book comprises 15 articles that John C. Ewers published between 1968 and 1992, largely in *American Indian Art Magazine*. Ewers is arguably the leading figure in Plains Indian art scholarship in the 20th century, and this volume provides an overview of his major contributions to the field. A student of Clark Wissler at Yale University in the 1930s, Ewers (1909-1997) broke with academic theories of his day and became a strong adherent of the direct historical method, a precursor to the methods and objectives subsumed today under the rubric of ethnohistory. Ewers was well respected for his meticulous research, combining data from ethnographic fieldwork, archaeological excavation, archival research, and material culture analysis to address significant questions with respect to Native American art, culture, and history.

This is the second title in a two-volume series that was initiated by Ewers and then-editor-in-chief of the University of Oklahoma Press, John Drayton. Each volume contains selected works by Ewers that are organized around a common theme. The first volume, *Plains Indian History and Culture: Essays on Continuity and Change*, was published in 1997. Ewers was actively engaged in its production at the time of his passing, contributing to the selection of articles to be included and to the critical task of selecting photographs and illustrations to support its content. His daughter, Jane Ewers Robinson, who assisted in the production of both titles, completed the edition.

The second volume's preface, by Candace Greene, a colleague of Ewers at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution; and its introduction, by Evan Maurer, former director of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, provide apt contextualization of Ewers' career and the impact of his research on the study of Plains Indian art. As a museum anthropologist, Ewers was an early innovator and a tireless advocate for the continued importance of material culture studies in the history of Native North America. This volume includes three articles in which Ewers uses material culture data as a vehicle to explore a range of historical and ethnological questions, including: changing conceptions of intangible property rights, symbols of international diplomacy, and the construction of artist biographies for anonymous works. His plea for a more uniform and centralized system for making museum collections and their documentation available to a larger research community presaged the digital revolution and ever-increasing cyber access to museum collections on a global scale.

The articles that were selected for this volume address a range of subjects and topics that reflect the consistent theme of Plains Indian art as a communicative system. Ewers' research largely examined the diversity of relationships represented in artistic production and reception within human communities, among different communities, between humans and other species, and between humans and the greater forces of the universe. This volume contains works that discuss

---

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

Plains Indian interaction with species that are indigenous to North America (antelope, weasels, and grizzly bears), those that Europeans introduced (cattle), and mythological creatures (water monsters). Most of the articles in the volume consider human relations, including those between Plains Indian artists and non-Native audiences, particularly anthropologists. Ewers' ability to develop novel and important lines of research is well demonstrated in the chapter that addresses the emergence of Euro-Americans as a motif and theme in 19th-century Plains Indian art. This line of inquiry advances our understanding of the development of new forms of representation, particularly those that arise in response to the "other."

Over his career, Ewers established an extensive foundation for the study of Plains Indian painting. His publications on the subject discuss his efforts to assign authorship to anonymous works in museum collections and his assessment of the shift in audience with respect to Native American painting from Native Americans to non-Native audiences. Ewers was keenly interested in the roles of audiences, particularly their responses, in the evolution of plastic forms of expression. Other chapters in this volume examine the role of European artists as ethnographic collectors and the relationships between Native subjects and European artists, such as that of Mandan Chief Four Bears and Karl Bodmer, an encounter that Ewers characterizes as a transfer of both media and technique. The volume concludes with a chapter that examines the history of research relationships between Plains Indian artists and anthropologists. This includes Ewers' use of drawings by Calvin Boy (Piegan) to illustrate his book, *The Horse in Blackfeet Indian Culture* (1955), and his collaboration with Victor Pepion (Piegan) to produce a set of murals in the lobby of the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning, Montana. In each instance, Ewers chose Native artists to visually interpret the oral tradition that was perpetuated by the oldest community members of the day.

The book is visually engaging and the University of Oklahoma Press is to be congratulated for its attention to details of production and design. The volume is lavishly illustrated with images of objects, paintings, drawings, maps, and historic photographs. This work will be of great interest and value to a broad readership that includes academics from a variety of disciplines, a considerable and diverse lay audience, and most importantly, members of the communities that Ewers' scholarship addresses.

## References Cited

Ewers, John C.

1955 *The Horse in Blackfeet Indian Culture*. Bulletin 159, Bureau of American Ethnology. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

1997 *Plains Indian History and Culture: Essays on Continuity and Change*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

*Daniel C. Swan is Curator of Ethnology at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. He has served as a member of the*

*Board of Directors of the Council for Museum Anthropology, and is a charter member of the Editorial Board for Museum Anthropology Review. He is also a research associate of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. His major published works include Peyote Religious Art: Symbols of Faith and Belief (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) and (with Garrick Bailey) Osage Art (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).*