

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Arts of the Indian Americas: Leaves from the Sacred Tree. By Jamake Highwater.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1fb3759f>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 9(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Berlo, Janet Catherine

**Publication Date**

1985-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Arts of the Indian Americas: Leaves from the Sacred Tree.** By Jamake Highwater. New York: Harper and Row, 1983. 372 pp. 385 b/w, 21 color illustrations. \$35.00 Cloth.

In his eloquent introduction, Jamake Highwater states that in writing this volume he was endeavoring to fill the great need for "a book addressed to the general reader which focuses upon the Americas (ancient and modern) as a vital source of art works and artistic inspiration" (p. 6). Moreover, he states that whereas his prior volume, *The Primal Mind*, deals with ideas, "this book deals with objects which make those primal ideas visible" (p. 6). Both of these are admirable aims. Unfortunately this book is an abysmal failure on almost every level.

This introduction, "The Sacred Tree," serves as chapter 1 (although it contains the credits and acknowledgements usually found in a preface). Chapter Two, "A Cultural and Historical Overview," is at once too ambitious and too general. Highwater relies on many outdated sources, and thus perpetuates the half-accurate generalizations of previous generations. While it is, of course, crucial for the general reader to have some idea of the cultural history of diverse ethnic groups, these short overviews of different regions are often a mishmash of stray historical or archaeological facts combined with previews of the art later to be discussed. The author has already taken on too ambitious a task by endeavoring to cover all media and all time periods of the indigenous art of the western hemisphere. Without finer skill at synthesizing large amounts of information, he can't reasonably expect to take on a cultural-historical overview as well. It would have been preferable to guide the reader to other historical or anthropological works that do the job with greater expertise.

Chapter Three, "An Aesthetic View of Indian America," is divided into sections on Art Forms, Iconography, and Media and Technology. In the first, Highwater endeavors to make some important points about the meaning of art, and the need to divest ourselves of Euro-centric intellectual trappings when we examine Native American art. Yet the section is merely an amalgam of undigested quotes from experts such as George Kubler, Herbert Read, and others. The result is reminiscent of a hastily composed undergraduate paper. Discussion of iconography begins with the following statement: "In all art there are several basic iconographic concerns: one is the way space is used; another is the

forms made in space; and a third is related to the way time is suggested in nontemporal art, such as painting or sculpture" (p. 78). It is disheartening to realize that the author of a book on art does not grasp one of the most fundamental terms in the discipline of art history: iconography refers to the symbolism and culturally-specific meaning of artistic imagery. Highwater goes on to speak of "iconographic styles" and visual space (p. 78-9). These are formal concerns, not iconographic ones.

Chapter Four, "Leaves from the Sacred Tree," is the real heart of the book (p. 99-347). In eleven sub-sections Highwater considers Native arts in all media, from basketry, textiles, featherwork, and mosaics to painting, sculpture, architecture, and other forms. Thus, all pottery of the hemisphere is discussed in one section, as is all metalwork, all architecture, and so forth. Occasionally this makes for interesting comparative reading for those with a particular fascination with one medium. It is illuminating to see historic Sioux and Tapirapé featherwork juxtaposed with pre-Columbian examples from Mexico and Peru. On the other hand, when within three pages Highwater describes Inuit snow block and sod houses, Northwest Coast plank houses, tipis, earth lodges, and domed thatch dwellings of the plains and prairies, Iroquois longhouses, and Navajo hogans without an illustration of even one of these, the reader does not learn very much (p. 263-5). On the whole, this clustering by medium obfuscates rather than enlightens. The artistic and cultural cohesiveness of the Maya and of the Hopi, for example, never emerges.

Though Highwater claims that this division by artistic medium is an unusual approach (p. 101), unfortunately it is not. Writers on New World arts have been making this mistake for a long time. Pal Kelemen's *Medieval American Art* (1943), the first text devoted to the pre-Hispanic arts of North, Middle and South America, took this approach. Sadly, even Christian Feest's recent *Native Arts of North America* (1980) perpetuates this division by medium. Native American arts make the most sense when studied as an integral part of each particular civilization. To examine these arts in any other fashion is to divest them both of meaning and of history. It is, perhaps, this profoundly ahistorical bias to which I object the most. If one considers, for a moment, how absurd it would be for Janson's *History of Art* to group pre-historic cave paintings with the Sistine ceiling, and Medieval

stained glass windows with Marcel Duchamp's *A Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors Even*, the folly of this approach becomes clear. It makes one realize how far we have still to go for Native American art history to be treated seriously.

While any author covering nearly four thousand years of the art history of an entire hemisphere is bound to make some factual mistakes, this volume is riddled with errors and inconsistencies. At least some of these should have been caught by an attentive editor. I will point out just a few, though they are legion:

On page 5, the text refers to a "one-thousand-year-old (sic) cave painting from the Pecos River area of Texas." In the adjacent photo of this pictograph, the caption reads "c. 1000 B.C." A line drawing of an architectural relief from the Mexican site of Xochicalco is mislabelled "Toltec" and no site name is provided (p. 65). On page 272, Highwater calls the Aztec capital city Teotihuacan in one paragraph and Tenochtitlan in the next; the latter is accurate. Twice in his discussion of the Maya, he links the archaeological site of Copan in the country of Honduras, with the geographic designation "the Peten," (p. 276, 279). The Peten is the northernmost state in Guatemala. On page 308, the Mexican pictorial manuscript, Codex Nuttall, is dated to 1450 A.D. Two pages later, in the caption to a color plate, its date is given as 690 A.D. There are scores more mistakes of this nature.

Harper and Row has not skimmed on illustrations. The 385 black and white text illustrations provide a nice mix of line drawings, diagrams, photos, and design details. Most of the black and white photos of objects are of fair to good quality. Several of the color photos are exceptionally poor. In contrast to the profuse illustrations, there are pitifully few maps for a volume as wide-ranging as this one. The writing is very uneven: occasionally graceful, more often serviceable, it sometimes lapses into nonsense such as "Otherwise, the Incaic architectural effect is that of the majesty of an elegant technical finesse" (p. 263).

Elsewhere, both in print and in broadcast media, Highwater has shown himself to be a popular spokesperson for traditional Native American thought and culture. Yet in this book he has grandly overstepped his abilities. He is neither a scholar, a careful researcher, nor a good synthesizer. Highwater seems to have been overwhelmed by the sheer mass of factual material. *Arts of*

*the Indian Americas* will infuriate the specialist, and drown the neophyte in a welter of unassimilated detail. It is unfortunate that the politics of commercial publishing too often dictate that large amounts of money be spent on such "publishing events" rather than on the truly useful and accurate works of scholarship and interpretation that we so desperately need in Native American Studies.

*Janet Catherine Berlo*  
University of Missouri—St. Louis