

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Indian Legacy of Charles Bird King. By Herman J. Viola.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6r80h1pr>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 4(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Hight, Kathryn S.

Publication Date

1980-06-01

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/>

bonesis as an astronomical document by Lehmann. Here it appears in interpreting such as Building J at Monte Alban, etc. No mention is made of the standard capture glyphs which are on the building — including place designations which are partly understood. The sign for “observatory” possibly is really the place sign for Tlaxiaco (Hartung, NAA).

We even encounter the copying hypothesis. This is that similar structures with similar alignments are copies of the original, which is, of course, the only one where the astronomy works. This has been done before for stone circles in Britain, for the pyramids in Egypt — where we know it's nonsense — and now it is postulated here. The continual surveying of the sites does serve to get the geometry down well, and thus serves future purposes. The impact of this on the knowledge of ancient astronomy is dubious.

Both books are well done technically. In text this difficult, they are remarkably free of typographical errors, but Figure 5 of Hatch's article has each individual panel upside down (PCA).

In short these two books are fascinating glimpses into a growing field. They are not without their problems, but are absolute musts for the bookshelf of anyone with a serious interest in these cultures, and will amply repay serious study.

Ronald R. Bourassa
Stan Babb
University of Oklahoma

The Indian Legacy of Charles Bird King. By Herman J. Viola. New York: Smithsonian Institution Press; Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976. 152 pp. \$19.95.

In *The Indian Legacy of Charles Bird King* Herman J. Viola reproduces together for the first time the extant works of the first government sponsored series of Indian portraits done in America. From 1822 to 1842 Charles Bird King, a skilled Washington portrait painter, produced approximately 143 portraits of Indian chiefs and other Native North American dignitaries for the War Department. Many of the originals

were destroyed in the Smithsonian fire of 1865, but Viola has located sixty-six originals or copies of the originals made by the artist. Although nearly all of these works are in public or quasi-public collections they have not heretofore been reproduced in one volume. Viola's attempt to do so is a welcome addition to the visual studies of art and Indian affairs.

The text accompanying these reproductions is, however, disappointing, especially if one has read Viola's earlier work, *Thomas McKenney: Architect of America's Early Indian Policy* (1974). Much of this current work is repetitive. Indeed, only two pages of text are devoted to the life and work of King. The protagonist of this book as in Viola's earlier work is Thomas Loraine McKenney. The current work, despite the title, is not so much about King as it is about McKenney's conception and use of King's portraits. Viola believes that it was McKenney who conceived of the idea of the Indian portraits in the first place, and that it was McKenney who established the Archives of the American Indian, Washington's first museum, in which the Bird portraits were first displayed. It was McKenney too, who, with James Hall brought the King portraits to the attention of a wider public through the publication of the subscription book *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, a three volume series containing lithographic reproduction of the Bird portraits.

The Indian Legacy of Charles Bird King is divided roughly into four topic areas. The first chapter includes a brief biography of King and an introduction to McKenney as a "key figure in the nation's Indian affairs in the first quarter of the nineteenth century." The second area of the book consists of two chapters which concentrate on the practice of inviting Indian leaders to Washington to talk to the "Great White Father," as an alternative to frontier warfare. The Indian leaders were brought to Washington, wined, dined and often bribed or intimidated in an effort to get them to sign treaties with the United States government. Disappointingly, much of Viola's discussion of the activities of these delegations is anecdotal, involving the social activities of the Indians en route to Washington and during their stay in the capitol city. There is little discussion of the key purpose of the visit — the negotiating and signing of the treaties. It was during these visits that the King portraits were painted.

The third area of the book includes two chapters detailing McKenney's and Hall's efforts and problems in producing and publishing the *History of the Tribes of North America*. This series contained 120 lithographic reproductions of the War Department portraits by King and others and its publication, as Viola outlines, was fraught with difficulties. Viola concludes the book with two chapters that record the history of the portraits after Bird's death. The largest single collection of Bird portraits with which Viola deals are those which were given by Bird to the Redwood Library in his hometown of Newport, Rhode Island. Those seventeen portraits were sold in 1969 and now for the most part find their home in the corporate collection of the Gulf States Paper Corporation in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

In the final section of the book Viola also discusses briefly and publishes for the first time sixteen pen and ink sketches made by Bird for some of the Indian portraits. These have only recently been discovered by a Bird descendant, Bayard LeRoy King. With these sketches and the collected reproduction of the extant Bird portraits Viola might have been able to make some thoughtful visual observations. Viola, however, does not address the visual implications of these portraits. Each painting is simply documented by subject and date, and in the checklist he also includes the dimensions and current location. With the sketches he simply locates the portraits for which the sketch was made, if it still exists.

The King portraits are handsome, colorful, and basically sympathetic, but when seen together they also present striking evidence of a highly romantic interpretation of the Indian. It is unfortunate that Viola did not address the visual substance of King's work. Had he done so his analysis of the legacy of Charles Bird King might have been more profound than that

he was a good if not greatly gifted artist, whose oeuvre included a wide range of subjects; his Indian portraits have assured him a permanent niche in the artistic heritage of the United States. Were it not for this gentle artist from Rhode Island, who never even went west of the Mississippi, the pictorial record of the Native Americans in the early years of the Republic would be meager indeed.

The Euro-American interpretation of the Native North American in the art of nineteenth century America was a persistent phenomenon. A thoughtful analysis of the degree and meaning of the interpretive content is a much needed discourse. The work of Charles Bird King might be a good starting point.

Kathryn S. Hight
University of California
Los Angeles