UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Ancient West Mexico: Art and Archeology of the Unknown Past. Edited by Richard F. Townsend.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7gd5k1fr

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 24(1)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Lewis, Thomas H.

Publication Date
2000

DOI
10.17953

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

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Repatriation Act of 1990. Perhaps other scholars will examine how other federal agencies have interacted with Indian tribes over the years, including the Bureau of Land Management and the National Forest Service.

Steven Crum
University of California, Davis

Ancient West Mexico: Art and Archeology of the Unknown Past. Edited by Richard F. Townsend. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1998. 308 pages. $50.00 cloth; $34.95 paper.

This is a beautiful book and a major demonstration of the archaic cultures of Nayarit, Colima, and Jalisco. The many elegant photographs of ceramic figures of humans, animals, and plants accompany fifteen essays on the investigations to date of the societies that flourished between 200 BC and AD 800.

The figurines, almost all looted from tombs and sold into private or public collections, were once called anecdotal art because they portray activities such as food preparation, eating, drinking, playing musical instruments, and brandishing weapons. They might equally be called cartoon art in that they capture a subtle and intriguing essence of both ordinary and extraordinary events, with meticulous detail to dress and status, as well as behavior, posture, gesture, and expression.

The figurines have high aesthetic quality. They represent a "technically demanding and iconographically complex art tradition" (p. 192). The book's photographs manage to communicate eloquent and powerful messages. Some figurines look directly into the eyes of the viewer, as if in mutual awareness. Some men and women, thirty to ninety centimeters tall, attend alertly to an anticipated action off-stage. Other figures smile quietly, assertively, or with wide full-toothed pleasure. Others sit or sag dejectedly in long-endured privation or pain. Warriors pose in all degrees of animosity, truculence, or threat. One small soldier, for example, peeks in wide-eyed apprehension from under a too-large helmet, clutching his spear. A girl, bulging with sexuality, stares disdainfully at her feet. A drunken man leans heavily and unsteadily over his companion, lust in his expression and liquor slopping over his chin. Happier figures wave their arms enthusiastically or manipulate drums, trumpets, or *raspadas.* Above all this sit elders in resolute dignity. There are group scenes—plaza celebrations, offerings, and ghastly self-mutilation—that are far different than the cool beauty of European classic sculpture. In the extended presence of this crowd of delightful characters one begins to feel, uncannily, that they are not sculpted models of humans, but sentient little humans in the form of sculptures.

The essays by seventeen contributors are as carefully crafted and illuminating as the ancient clay figurines. These articles are concerned appropriately with the autochthonous development of West Mexican societies and their relationships with the peoples of Central Mexico and South America. Included in the book are deep evaluations of ecology and natural resources,

settlement, the rise of state-like Teuchitlan, sea trade with Equador-Peru, mortuary practice, feasting, sacrifice, shamanism, rulership, art history, and the interesting influences of ancient imagery on modern Mexican and North American art. Maps, chronological tables, and diagrams assist the reader.

The fine ceramic art of West Mexico undoubtedly owed its development and exquisitely attained perfection to the indulgence of the wealthy and powerful elites in an evolving hierarchical society. Curiously, most of the pieces and collections of this art, a millennium or two later, are still in the hands of those modern elites wealthy enough to support the illegal trade of objects from desecrated sites and powerful enough to ignore national efforts to preserve these sites.

Thomas H. Lewis
Boyd, Montana

A Cold Day to Die: Murder on the Highway. By Johnny Sughani. Chugiak, Alaska: Salmon Run Press, 1998. 153 pages. $12.95 paper.

This book's title should be *A Cold Place to Die* rather than *A Cold Day to Die* because place is indispensable to Johnny Sughani's novel. That is, locale is central to his creative plot.

Sughani's character, Philip Highmountain, reflects someone who lives and moves in a literally and metaphorically glaciated world. The author was able to make use of Alaska's natural climate—icy roads and below-zero days—to create a dangerously cold tempo and an emotionally charged tone mirrored in deathly winds. The emotional tone is embedded in Sughani's syntax.

The writer's sketch of the northern landscape is so true-to-life that its description often rises above the novel's character development. In the opening scenes, Highmountain's girlfriend Sue—drinking while she is pregnant—gives birth to a sick baby. Rather than focusing on the individual struggle of these three characters, Sughani forces the reader to examine the holistic picture of a tribe that becomes the protagonist.

The drunk Native character has a long intellectual history—look at William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest.* Shakespeare's character, Caliban, is the first drunken indigenous character in Western literature. In *A Cold Day to Die,* the author's focus on this character-type changes direction: his character development moves from an individual protagonist to a whole tribe or indigenous nation. This is crucial to the non-western novel or narrative.

The People in *A Cold Day to Die* become the protagonist. I give credit for this general idea in literature written by Native writers to Charles Larson. In his work, *The Novel in the Third World,* Larson suggests that a "situational novel" is ideally defined as a narrative in which the center character's importance is replaced by a collective group of people undergoing a common experience. That commonly shared experience for indigenous communities is colonialism.

Of course, the focus of *A Cold Day to Die* is on the destruction of the tribal family system as seen through the dialogue between Highmountain and Sue. When she tells Highmountain that his son does not want him, the news