

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Privileging the Past:Reconstructing History in Northwest Coast Art.
ByJudith Ostrowitz.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87c1q3rk>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 25(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Newsome, Elizabeth A.

Publication Date

2001-03-01

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/>

The basic perspective of the essays works to bend interactions between Natives and newcomers toward a more refined understanding of how the newcomers came out at the end of the contact experience. Axtell makes an important distinction between adaptive changes that resulted from settlers copying Native behaviors like warfare tactics or borrowing things like snowshoes and corn and negative changes which occurred among the settlers simply because the Natives stood in their way. Adaptive changes were important, but, he argues, only insofar as they enabled settlers to defeat their Native opponents. Negative changes were far more crucial because in the existence of the Other settlers defined for themselves new notions of savagery and civility and adopted the "fortress mentality" that drives American foreign policy to this day.

For the most part *Natives and Newcomers* works well as it was intended, as an introductory text to undergraduates and interested readers that gathers some of Axtell's best essays in a more convenient format. The omission of a serious consideration of disease and its impact on postcontact America stands as the only strike against the book's comprehensiveness. Axtell's sequential approach to the phases of contact history works well as an interpretive guide to putting the postcontact history of the eastern seaboard into perspective, but a reconfigured collection of essays can only go so far. Training such a history on an understanding of the settler societies that evolved out of the contact experience is useful, but nations like the Iroquois, Narragansett, Cherokee, and Creek ought to merit more pride of place than as "the largest and most persistent obstacles the colonists had to overcome" in a story as important as this (p. ix).

James Taylor Carson
Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario

Privileging the Past: Reconstructing History in Northwest Coast Art. By Judith Ostrowitz. Seattle: University of Washington Press; Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999. 264 pages. \$35.00 cloth.

Judith Ostrowitz's *Privileging the Past: Reconstructing History in Northwest Coast Art* is one of the most welcome additions to the newer generation of literature on style and practice in contemporary Native American art. While this volume assumes a place of major importance among a body of recent publications that examine the way Native artists contend with the global influence of Western markets and cultural forces, it exceeds many of the given boundaries that have long characterized that area of scholarship by establishing several new directions for discourse. Ostrowitz accomplishes this by posing precisely the question that has lain unexposed throughout the history of this research: Why has formal conservatism persisted as a characteristic of certain living art forms, in this case, those created by a highly regarded group of Northwest Coast artists? Moreover, what does this kind of visual continuity with the past signify, how does it function, and what are its consequences for the way this

art is received by museums, collectors, and insiders within the artists' own communities?

In grappling with these issues, Ostrowitz focuses on the principal aspect of such traditional modes of production that makes scholars schooled in the tenets of Western art history, and particularly modernism, squirm with intellectual discomfort: the creation of copies or near-replicas that closely approximate historical works. This anathema to the creed of originality and the valuation of "primary objects" associated with the Western view of art as a history of individual expression and formal progress has been treated in two primary ways in previous research. The first is the imposition of pejorative judgments that attribute such applications of precedent to the influence of stereotypes held by the patrons who provide an extracultural market for these works. Thus, the replication of past styles represents a kind of failure on the part of non-Western artists to embrace the enlightenment gained by developing an art that is personally meaningful, if culturally decontextualized; at worst, it has been viewed as a form of self-negation that capitulates to consumer demands. The second position reflects a reaction to the first, attempting to redeem these works from the stigmas of inauthenticity and derivative design by emphasizing their role in the cultural survival of Native American people or their assimilation of certain modernist points of view.

In *Privileging the Past*, Ostrowitz successfully disengages her perspective from the circularity of these arguments and frames the question in a more richly meaningful way. What, she asks, is the nature of historicism as a feature of Northwest Coast arts that are produced today for a market that includes collectors, public institutions, and the ceremonial needs of the artists' own communities? Why do accomplished individuals whose works are sought by each of these clienteles, and who are well aware of the standards applied in the world of the avant garde, consciously elect to quote from and recontextualize images from the past? As Ostrowitz indicates, all the artists who are the subjects of her study have abundant exposure to the mainstream through telecommunications and the media, as well as interactions with patrons, museums, and scholars. Some have received formal training in studio practice, and many simultaneously create objects in both historicized and up-to-date styles. Thus, she recognizes their effort to frame contemporary statements based on past form as a deliberate choice, motivated by a complex layering of strategies and ideals that unfold through the case studies she illustrates.

In mapping out this new approach, the book benefits greatly from the author's combined perspectives as an artist, art historian, and participant in organizing a number of keynote Northwest Coast exhibitions. Much of the pioneering scholarship in the study of acculturation and transculturation in Native American and other non-Western arts arises from perspectives grounded in "the anthropology of art," or those of art historians whose training distances them from studio and curatorial practice. Ostrowitz brings to her analysis the experience of a mixed-media artist cognizant of the contested ground where Modernist, Postmodernist, and other ideologies directly impact artistic choices and degrees of critical success. Moreover, her efforts as a curator of Northwest Coast collections at the American Museum of Natural

History greatly inform her interpretations of the fascinating and sometimes difficult transactions that characterize the collaboration between Native American artists and institutions devoted to the public presentation of their work. As a result, the book stakes a claim on uncharted ground; in truly addressing the status of contemporary Northwest Coast carvings, masks, and paintings within the rubric of "fine arts," it bridges a significant gap in the present state of research.

The recognition that a significant class of "traditionally" produced works of art are fully accorded the prestige of this designation by collectors, and to some degree, by institutions and critics, has long been lacking in the literature on artistic assimilation and change. Many of the most significant studies in this area have operated in tandem with explorations of travel and tourism as features of postcolonial cultural and economic imperialism, concerned principally with how objects become commodified, encode symbolic elements of exchange, and reflect disproportionate relations of power. While Ostrowitz acknowledges that the culturally and economically significant choices of Northwest Coast artists to participate in a genealogy of style continues to marginalize them from the critical mainstream, her book does not force readers into accepting the awkward convention of reserving "fine arts" status for only those works acceptable to the experimental elite. Although her publication will have profound importance for scholars and students concerned with the study of "ethnic" and "tourist" arts, they will be pleasantly surprised to find that it proceeds from a different conceptual basis than works that automatically relegate all products of cultural interaction to that class.

Readers versed in the precedent of such scholars as James Clifford, Ruth Phillips, and Shelly Errington may experience something of a shock to find that the idea of authenticity, so thoroughly deconstructed as to be discredited as a term of analysis, is reintroduced into the language of *Privileging the Past*. However, Ostrowitz's use of this term invokes an interpretive model quite separate from those connected to the "salvage methodology" that so much recent theory has sought to purge from the evaluation of non-Western art. Authenticity in *Privileging the Past* is not a criterion applied by the author as a means of discriminating the value of works, but a multifaceted object of study in its own right. One of the author's key contributions is to define the way each party involved in the making and distribution of Northwest Coast art operates according to a concept of authenticity that is embedded in its own position and historical perspectives. Although these notions of what is acceptable and appropriate may vary widely among the creators, consumers, and wider audience for this art, they are an intrinsic element of the way works are crafted and negotiated across different segments of viewership. The Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuxalk, Nuuchahnulth, Haida, and other Northwest Coast tribes recognize their own principles for the correct or historically accurate representation of form, which they maintain internally as an audience for ceremonial art, and adjudicate with certain modifications in art for external display. Collectors and institutions have their own favored definitions of what constitutes a veristic portrayal of the crest art produced in this region. Most at

odds are the notions of authenticity operant in the system of hereditary rights and privileges displayed through potlatching as an institution of Northwest Coast society and those of the Western avant garde, who associate truth with the creative expression of the artist's unique inner vision. The very historicism that invests objects with the intangible value of genealogy and precedent in Native communities, and which is valued for different reasons by museums and private patrons, emerges in Ostrowitz's arguments as an irreconcilable problem for its reception in the critical venues of contemporary art.

However, what is perhaps most valuable in the author's attempt to expose these diverging frames of reference is the attention she gives to the role that Native artists and their communities have increasingly assumed as the arbiters of their heritage. Three of the book's four chapters examine instances in which Northwest Coast people have determined, to varying degrees, how canonical examples of their visual and performative arts should be represented or restored for public viewing. The first, which concerns a century of reconstruction at the famous "Chief Shakes" Community House in the Tlingit community of Wrangell, Alaska, establishes a Native precedent of exemplary form which is shifted and recontextualized through a series of renovations; the second concerns the crafting of a representative "Northwest Coast village" at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC); and the third centers on a repertoire of dance performances adapted from traditional Kwakwaka'wakw clan privileges for public exhibition. The chapters devoted to the Chief Shakes House and the CMC installation are largely concerned with the problem of collaboration between agencies wishing to create historical depictions based on Northwest Coast life and the individuals commissioned to carve, paint, and restore representative works, or to participate in an advisory capacity. Chapter three, "Making Dance History: Kwakwaka'wakw Performance Art at the American Museum of Natural History" emerges as the most rewarding of these studies. It is enriched by the perspectives and recollections of the many contributors Ostrowitz interviewed, and provides the most telling insights into the agency of Northwest Coast people in crafting their own methods of self-representation for an international audience. Whereas the strategies, agendas, and initiatives of Native people are highlighted throughout the book, it is in this chapter that they take center stage. In this regard, as in many others, *Privileging the Past* offers a firm precedent for future research, drawing attention to the depth of knowledge that may be gained when the study of patronage and institutional practices are balanced by exploring the incentives and cultural imperatives of Native American people.

Elizabeth A. Newsome

University of California, San Diego