

## BOOK REVIEWS

Campbell, Tyrone, Joel Kopp and Kate Copp: *Navajo Pictorial Weaving: 1880-1950: Folk Art Images of Native Americans*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press. 1995. ISBN 0-8263-1617-4 Paper USA \$19.95.

*Navajo Pictorial Weaving: 1880-1950* is a carefully compiled compendium of the genre, chock full of well done, mostly color illustrations, 178 in all. The authors offer a multitude of interesting facts, statistics and observations in accompaniment. They are obviously well versed in the technical details of Navajo pictorial weaving and the whole spectrum of possibilities with regard to both medium and content. The book is organized according to the primary subject matter depicted in each work, apparently for the sake of convenience, since there is not necessarily any significant relationship between those conjoined within each chapter. In that respect and in several others, the book is more a collector's guide to pictorial weaving, than an analysis of it.

The sections are as follows: Birds, Flora, Fauna, and Livestock; Human and Anthropomorphic Figures; Transportation and Technology: The Railroad and Its Influence; Buildings and American Flags: Symbols of Authority; Yeis, Yeibichais, and Corn Yeis: Symbols of Mythology; Kachinas and Masks: Images from the Hopi; Ceremonial Sandpainting Tapestries; Letters, Words, Logos, and Fraternal Symbols; Contemporary Weaving.

The authors' enthusiasm and genuine affection for the subject matter is apparent and that makes the book easy to read. The prose style is pleasant, although there is a tendency to editorialize without sufficient explanation or rationalization and some lack of clarity due to over-statement and imprecise language. Overall, the approach as well as the prose style and enthusiasm of the authors are those of the collector/dealer, rather than the scholar. Hence, the focus is on identification of the remarkable, unusual and rare, rather than an in-depth look at the genre as a whole. The admonition on pages 107-108 regarding the importance of determining whether or not a weaving is a line-for-line reproduction of a sand painting (as if anyone other than a trained Navajo religious specialist could be sure and would be at all likely to say so!) exemplifies these priorities, as does

the concern over whether or not Navajo pictorial weaving is genuine American Folk Art, discussed at length in the beginning of the book.

Still, because of the thoroughness of their approach in seeking out and presenting the most outstanding examples of pictorial weaving, the authors offer a host of intriguing facts and potentially fascinating connections between Navajo traditional culture and the development of this type of weaving. They even emphasize this aspect of their work in the first few pages of the book: "These pictorial textiles provide an insight into the cultural changes that the Navajo experienced,..." And much of the information offered does indeed point in this direction. But dozens of intriguing connections between Navajo culture and these weavings are very quickly passed over in the text and, even when they are noted, those connections tend to be explored only superficially, at best.

Prime examples of this apparent disinterest in in-depth analysis are the authors' comments regarding the use of the United States flag in these weavings and the choices made in doing so (pages 71 and 79, in the caption for Figure 108). The clear variation in preferences between Sioux and Navajo treatment of the subject are undoubtedly historically and culturally based. Careful analysis of those differences might lend insight into important issues of aesthetics as well as content in Navajo weaving tradition, but the differences are simply noted, not discussed. Perhaps even more significant are similarities identified between the traditional Navajo Chief blanket and the proportions and design of the United States flag. Again, analysis of those relationships would very likely provide important insight into why certain motifs were adopted and others were not. But it is simply not attempted. The same might be said about comments regarding taboos and religious symbolism in pictorial weavings. There are wonderfully intriguing points made throughout the book, but none is explored beyond a simple statement of the fact. Nor are those facts very often supported by bibliographical references.

Another area of interest and potential insight touched upon in the volume is the connection between Navajo pictorial weavings and the quilts, needlework samplers and hooked rugs created by Anglo women during the same period: fascinating, but, again, never explored. It is ironic that, at the same time as their quite revolutionary acknowledgement of possible connections between Navajo weaving and Anglo women's art, the authors commit the classic sin of omission that has plagued serious consideration of the domestic arts of women for years: an early and explicit insistence that the work of these weavers is "anonymous", although several individual artists are identified later in the volume, a few by name. It is clear in other sections of the text that the identification of several more individual artists

might be possible, but it is also clear that the authors have no interest in doing so.

This approach is clearly a function of the expertise and interest of the writers, as well as their projected audience, but will be frustrating for readers whose interest in the subject goes beyond connoisseurship. The book may be equally frustrating for those with little or no background in the history of Navajo weaving, albeit for different reasons. Technical terms like *handspun*, *bayeta* and *Germantown* are dropped throughout the text with virtually no explanation or definition, either historically or technically. An approach that, once again, will be more useful to collectors and dealers (for the identification and pricing of various categories of textiles) than to readers interested in understanding the history of Navajo pictorial weaving and its relationship to Navajo culture.

Historical references are given the same summary treatment, presumably for the same reasons. More information along those lines is important only to readers interested in the larger picture of the Navajo and their art, but unnecessary for the dealer/collector. Occasional references to the ghastly experience of incarceration at *Bosque Redondo* is a case in point. That dark time in Navajo history is barely mentioned and only in terms of its effect on weaving quality, without any mention of the circumstances or results of those years of incarceration or the conditions to which the Navajo were subjected. Even the summary slaughter of all of their sheep by government agents, a factor which obviously impacted upon weaving, is never mentioned.

Except for such omissions, the brief history of Navajo weaving in the early pages of the book offers a fine encapsulation of the evolution of the medium. Illustrations of the historical and artistic precedents would have rendered the section more useful, however. The authors talk about the importance of Pueblo and Mexican formal and technical influence but, again, unless readers already have a considerable knowledge of weaving in the Southwest, they will have no idea what those precedents looked like or how they may actually have influenced later design. The same is true regarding references to Navajo precedents. The Chief blanket and its various phases are mentioned frequently, as is the *bayeta serape*, but there is nary an illustration to help the reader understand the points being made.

Thus, despite the authors' interest, thoroughness and vast knowledge of pictorial weaving, the reader is left with only part of the picture. The strong focus on connoisseurship and dealer/collector interests has also all but left the Navajo out of the discussion. The weavers are mentioned frequently, of course, and there are references throughout to various traditions, ceremonies and taboos, to Navajo life styles and the changes contact with

Europeans wrought within all of that. But those references occur virtually at random and only in the discussion of specific works of art. Patterns of use and technique, loaded with information and insight when compared even superficially with Navajo culture and tradition, are sometimes noted, but never explored within a cultural context, e.g, which animals, commercial logos, ritual symbols, categories of objects are commonly used and which are not. There are cultural and aesthetic explanations for all of these and they go beyond the simple fact that they were available for use as part of the Navajo visual vocabulary, the most frequently cited reason for their inclusion.

The assertion that the inclusion of letters into the weavings is random and a matter of aesthetics rather than content, because "the Navajo language has no written alphabet" (text with Figure 172) is an example of this kind of non-analysis. It overlooks the important fact that Navajo children were attending United States government boarding schools as early as 1879, where traditional approaches to language and communication were continually belittled and carefully replaced with Anglo ideas about same. The power and prestige associated with the components of written language, as well as their ability to convey certain ideas as well as significant power, whether or not they could be read, is obvious.

The use of letters and numbers in several examples from the book (e.g., Figures 81 and 129) suggest that their use in these weavings goes considerably beyond the random and purely aesthetic. In the most obvious of these, birds representative of "spiritual messengers" which are almost always depicted in weavings that feature the sacred corn plant are replaced in one register with the word "corn", clearly neither a random placement, nor merely aesthetic in its significance. Although it is clear that the authors do not intend to do so, offering such simplistic explanations for the motives and aesthetic choices of the weavers belie the complex sophistication of the Navajo people, their culture, and their art tradition.

It is impossible to apprehend the motives or aesthetic systems of any group of artists without examining social structure, subsistence, cosmology, ways of modeling reality, ritual tradition, etc. Yet, throughout the book, the authors speak as though both the artist's motives and aesthetic decisions are transparent, without offering any information or any data to support their comments (e.g., the reference to "uninhibited artistic freedom and sense of humor" on p.7 and to "attempts at reality" on p.39). Without a clear sense of how the Navajo model reality, one cannot presume to know whether or not a Navajo weaver was attempting same.

The authors of *Navajo Pictorial Weaving: 1880-1950* begin and end the book with assertions that these textiles provide important insight into

cultural changes for the Navajo. It is difficult to see how such changes can be identified, much less appreciated—with or without the evidence the textiles provide—unless a clear picture of traditional culture before the arrival of Europeans or, at least, before the arrival of Anglo-Americans has been developed. Nor does it seem likely that one can understand the ways in which it has not changed. No such analysis of Navajo traditional culture is presented in the book and it is clear that the authors do not feel that it is important. Nonetheless, the fact is, an accurate appraisal of culture change cannot be gleaned from anything less than a systematic study of the culture itself and it is a bit arrogant to suggest that it is possible to do so, merely through the analysis of a small segment of one aspect of a complex tradition.

Although the wealth of visual and factual data offered in *Navajo Pictorial Weaving: 1880-1950* is extremely valuable and is almost certainly available nowhere else, the book is disappointing. Presentation of a wealth of visual data and a multitude of potentially interesting facts that suggest relationships between the genre and Navajo traditional culture is simply not enough.

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Eichstaedt, Peter H.: *If You Poison Us: Uranium and Native Americans*.  
Santa Fe, New Mexico: Red Crane Books, 1994, ISBN 1-878610-40-6  
Cloth USA \$19.95.

If you prick us, do we not bleed?...

If you poison us, do we not die?

Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (III.i.56-57)

In this meticulously researched book, journalist Peter Eichstaedt relates another tragic chapter in the history of genocide intrinsic to the colonization and "development" of the Americas.

He introduces his work with the explanation that it tells the story of "the sacrifice of lives, families, and land" that the Diné (Navajo), Laguna Pueblo, and other Aboriginal nations of the U.S. southwest have made in the interest of "America's quest for nuclear superiority." He recounts the terrible toll of death, disease and cultural dislocation that have resulted from the development of large-scale uranium mining on the Colorado Plateau. Sacrifice