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Review of *Living with American Indian Art: The Hirschfield Collection* by Alan J. Hirschfield with Terry Winchell

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As the reality sets in that Native Americans have not become the vanishing race, their continuum of artistic excellence is underscored in the collection amassed by Alan and Berte Hirschfield. Living with American Indian Art documents how these avid collectors have integrated a broad range of cultural materials into a private Wyoming home, reflecting their collecting passion and broad interests. From the Tlingit baskets to the Zia pottery to the Cheyenne buckskin dresses, the Native arts found in the Hirschfield collection are exquisite works, in keeping with Alan Hirschfield’s mantra, “When you see something beautiful, buy it!”

Gaylord Torrance lends the book a scholarly voice in his foreword recounting the evolution of the western ranch house with historical photos of environments related to the Hirschfield home. “In such a context,” Torrance writes, “the significance of the objects was transformed; although harking back, they no longer served as functional items. . . . Their deepest meaning, perhaps, had come to stand for a profound and shared sense of place.” Hirschfield reiterates this point, recounting that he and his wife anticipated the need to display their growing collection as they built their log home.

Living with American Indian Art provides a glimpse into the Hirschfields’ residence with art in situ. Garth Dowling’s elegant photography of both the residence and the art anchors the book with beautifully detailed illustrations, broadly organized by medium. The collection is built mostly from Plains materials dating to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, art made at the height of the artists’ mythically constructed cultural doom. Brought publicly into dialogue with each other through this publication, the items featured in the catalogue serve as evidence that these cultures were in a state of adaptation—using new materials (seed beads) and forms (valises)—but not in a state of artistic demise. As these materials—Plains beaded cradles and shirts and many objects like them—entered the collecting market, it was not unusual for their provenance to be lost in the shuffle between dealers and owners. Hirschfield attended to collecting these histories, when possible, providing interesting documentation for some works in his collection, such as the historical black-and-white portrait photographs of Nellie Gates’s family (Yanktonai Sioux, North Dakota) with their beaded valises, including the one in the collection pictured with Gates’s daughter.
Given the book’s beautiful layout, the catalogue would have benefited from more scholarship about the art. Despite anecdotal historical references and cultural context, including that provided by Terry Winchell, most of the writing reflects the collector’s autobiography and lends little more than explanation of how he came to build his collection. One can hope that the collectors will seek out public venues where they will share these extraordinary examples of Native creativity.

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