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Review of *Imprisoned Art, Complex Patronage: Plains Drawings by Howling Wolf and Zotom at the Autry National Center* by Joyce M. Szabo

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Imprisoned Art, Complex Patronage: Plains Drawings by Howling Wolf and Zotom at the Autry National Center. By Joyce M. Szabo. Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press, 2011. xiv + 210 pp. Illustrations, photographs, notes, references, index. $60.00 cloth, $30.00 paper.

Imprisoned Art adds to its author’s growing list of impressive publications that consider the so-called ledger drawings created by Plains Indian warriors incarcerated, as prisoners of the Southern Plains wars, at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, between 1875 and 1879. It focuses on what were once two fully intact books of drawings, one by Zotom (Kiowa), the other by Howling Wolf (Cheyenne). Treated earlier in Dorothy Dunn’s 1877: Plains Indian Sketch Books of Zo-Tom and Howling Wolf (1969), and, with respect to Howling Wolf, in Szabo’s Howling Wolf and the History of Ledger Art (1994), the books receive here a comprehensive analysis that considers not only the artists and their drawings, but, most significantly, their patron.

Szabo’s introduction describes the books’ origins; discusses their patron/collector, Eva Scott, who commissioned the works directly from the artists while visiting St. Augustine in 1877; and explains how the books ultimately became part of the collections of the Southwest Museum of the American Indian (now part of the Autry National Center of the American West) in Los Angeles. Her opening chapter, “The Southern Plains Wars, Fort Marion, and Representational Art,” offers historical background on the events leading up to the capture of the seventy-two warriors and their three years in captivity at the fort, including a useful review of the literature on drawings made at Fort Marion and the challenges they present to anthropological, ethnographic, historical, and art historical research methodologies. “On Collecting and Being Collected” (chapter 2) provides a biographical sketch of the books’ commissioner, Eva Scott, the well-educated, artistic, widely traveled, Victorian-era daughter of a wealthy New York publisher. Focusing in particular on Scott’s travels, interest in art, and her relationship with the two artists, Szabo skillfully integrates an analysis of the books within Scott’s biography and her role in shaping the volumes.

“Zotom: Kiowa Artist as Historian” (chapter 3) and “Howling Wolf: Cheyenne Artist as Ethnographer” (chapter 4) consider the two drawing books, which Scott labeled “The Life of the Red Man. Illustrated by a Kiowa Brave” and “Scenes from Indian Life. Drawn by Howling Wolf.” While Zotom’s book features drawings of life in the Plains and historic events associated with the warriors brought to Fort Marion, Howling Wolf’s presents only drawings of Plains life. This distinction in subject matter, here and in other work by the
artists, informs Szabo's applying the epithets “historian” and “ethnographer”—terms, however convenient, that some scholars may find problematic. Carefully analyzing each of the drawings in the two books, Szabo provides detailed and exacting descriptions of customs, personal items, and apparel shown in the scenes of Plains experience as well as historical context and discussion for Zotom’s representations of specific events associated with the warriors brought to Fort Marion. She concludes with an analysis of how the two books are products of the coming together of a Victorian patron and imprisoned Indian warrior artists.

Szabo’s informed description and analysis become an important resource to scholars of these so-called ledger drawing books. Page-by-page studies are essential to the field, and here Szabo calls attention to the physical nature of such books and how the drawings, particularly those now separated from their bindings, frequently appear, misleadingly, like self-contained works of art. She urges viewers to imagine how the drawings once functioned as bound pages in a book held in one’s hands. In light of her attention to such crucial matters, it is unfortunate her publisher did not support her concerns through a physical design sensitive to such matters. The crowded and at times confusing integration of plates, figures, and text makes it difficult to imagine the original appearance and experience of the Howling Wolf and Zotom manuscripts. Ideally, the book would have featured full-scale, facsimile reproductions of both drawing books—followed by Szabo’s text, plates, and figures—so readers could experience the manuscripts for themselves as they appeared in Scott’s day.

Nevertheless, Szabo richly rewards her readers for their efforts to imagine the original books, particularly in her discussion of Eva Scott and her relationship with the artists. Rarely do we know so much about the commissioning of specific drawing books from Fort Marion and the life of the patron behind their production (those acquired by Lt. Richard Henry Pratt, the commanding officer at Fort Marion, and his translator, George Fox, are notable exceptions). Rightly seizing on the importance of this aspect of the material, Szabo makes it a major dimension of her study. Her probing, multifaceted, and informed approach to Scott’s role as the books’ patron broadens this narrow but crucial avenue of inquiry into drawing books from Fort Marion and causes one to imagine, with a great sense of loss, the now unknowable circumstances surrounding the creation of the many other surviving drawings and drawing books created there.

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