Fall 2012

Review of Plains Indian Art: The Pioneering Work of John C. Ewers edited by Jane Ewers Robinson

Bill Anthes
Pitzer College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly
Part of the American Studies Commons, Cultural History Commons, and the United States History Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2818

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

John Canfield Ewers (1909–1997) authored two important books on Plains Indian art: Plains Indian Painting: A Description of an Aboriginal American Art (1939) and Plains Indian Sculpture: A Traditional Art from America's Heartland (1986). The present collection is the second of two volumes of short essays first published in journals and specialized catalogs. The first, Plains Indian History and Culture: Essays on Continuity and Change (1997), included a number of essays that looked to works of art as sources of primary historical information. This volume collects fifteen essays foregrounding works of art and matters of style, iconography, the historiography of Plains art, as well as patterns of patronage that shaped major collections.

Ewers studied under Clark Wissler at Yale University, where he developed a solid grounding in museum anthropology and an appreciation for the evidentiary value of historical collections of Native American material. As founding curator at the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning, Montana, Ewers developed close relationships with Blackfeet artists and informants. After relocating to Washington, D.C., and taking a position at the Smithsonian Institution, Ewers maintained his focus on the study of Plains cultures, continuing to work closely with living Native people and practicing artists.

The essays collected here are notable not only for their anthropological and historical depth, but also for their attention to recent artworks that demonstrate the continuity and dynamism of Plains cultures. Ewers had an art connoisseur's eye and an encyclopedic knowledge of important collections. Each essay is concise and well polished, focusing on careful selection of exemplary artworks. Editor Jane Ewers Robinson (Ewers's daughter) has selected essays that allow readers to follow an idea as Ewers pursued it across multiple examples. Plains animal iconography (natural and supernatural) is explored in essays on the weasel, bear, Spanish cattle, and the water monster. Ewers examined historiographical themes in the essays "A Century of Plains Indian Art Studies," "Plains Indian Artists and Anthropologists: A Fruitful Collaboration," and "The Emergence of the Named Indian Artists in the American West." Ewers's focus on unique artworks and questions of attribution (for example, the essay "Three Effigy Pipes by an Eastern Dakota Master Carver") illuminate his abiding interest in and recognition of Native artists as individuals and on intercultural exchanges between individuals as historically significant. Collectively, these essays reveal Ewers as a researcher and writer whose work remains relevant and exciting today.

BILL ANTHES
Department of Art and Art History
Pitzer College, The Claremont Colleges

© 2012 Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln