
Jessica R. Metcalfe

Life in miniature, history in vibrant hues, art on parade—this is what is presented in Grand Procession, a catalogue printed by the Denver Art Museum to accompany its recent exhibit of contemporary Native American dolls. Meant to serve as a celebration of this art form, the book makes clear that these figures are more than just playthings: they are sculptural “little people” meticulously clothed and accurately designed to depict Plains and Plateau ceremonial regalia.

Dolls have been created for centuries throughout North America, and exhibits such as the Heard Museum’s 2010 More Than Child’s Play have sought to elevate the art form to where it belongs—among other respected
Native art practices. In Grand Procession, detailed snapshots of the exhibit's dolls in all their finery sit alongside descriptions from the artists themselves, compiled and edited by the Native adornment scholar Lois Sherr Dubin, best known for her encyclopedic The History of Beads (1987) and North American Indian Jewelry and Adornment (1999).

The collection itself is part of the private holdings of Charles and Valerie Diker, who have collected fine Native American historic and contemporary art for the past thirty-five years. Historic war shirts, knife sheaths, pipe bags, and moccasins all occupy respected places in their extensive collection. Through the addition of these contemporary doll figures, however, the Dikers have helped bring a new level of appreciation to this small form. Indeed, the figures in the exhibit and the book add a great deal to our understanding of Plains Indian art and the creative practice of assemblage. The dolls accurately combine items of adornment into ensembles; they add another dimension to colorful ledger art (literally turning two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional figures); and they “colorize” the historic black-and-white images of the 1800s, bringing them to life through bright and vivid colors and patterns.

With a focus on the Great Plains and Plateau, Grand Procession features five of the most important artists of this genre, including Jamie Okuma (Luiseno/Shoshone-Bannock), the Growing Thunder Women (Assiniboine-Sioux), and Rhonda Holy Bear (Cheyenne River Sioux). The “conversations” with these women, which make up the body of the book, are actually essays composed of quotes in the artists’ own voices, mediated by Dubin. They highlight interesting details such as Okuma’s great-grandfather’s rodeo trick riding, the Growing Thunder Women’s “studio” (sharing one table, but each with her own iPod and headphones), and Holy Bear’s eloquent understanding of the important role these “little people” play: not only as reminders of the past, but as a means of bringing history forward into the future. These artists, who have won numerous awards and the respect of Native American and art communities, succeed in restoring the beauty and dignity of their ancestors in an exquisite form.

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