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## Review of *The Flag in American Indian Art* By Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp

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*The Flag in American Indian Art.* By Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp. Cooperstown, NY: New York State Historical Association, 1993. Foreword, introduction, black and white photographs, 120 color illustrations, map, catalogue, bibliography. 120 pp. \$40.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

The public appetite for American Indian crafts and artistic motifs can be traced back to the early part of this century, the same period of American cultural nativism that inspired the Arts and Crafts movement in midwestern industrial cities and a flight of young painters and sculptors to fledgling artists' colonies in the American Southwest. Before the Depression put an end to this bonanza for native-born talent, American Indians had been able to stake a large claim in media as diverse as miniature totem poles, beadwork, and basketry. While museums scoured the countryside for medicine bundles, pipes, and headdresses, the American middle-class accumulated more recent and secular works, not only tourist wares but family treasures shaken loose by the forces of poverty.

With the renewal of popular interest in all things American Indian in the early 1970s, a great quantity of this middle-class accumulation is coming back to light in exhibitions, catalogues, and illustrated critical works like *The Flag in American Indian Art*. Unfortunately, the authors promise more than they are able to deliver.

The title of this book suggests a comprehensiveness in time and cultures, yet three-fourths of the objects shown were made by Lakotas, and none were made after the Depression. Emphasizing the Lakotas may be forgiven, the authors contend, because flag imagery is prevalently a Lakota phenomenon. When they attempt to explain the origins and meaning of flag imagery, however, Herbst and Kopp identify factors found throughout Indian country: traditions of collecting war trophies, the display of flags to acknowledge U.S. protection, the use of flags to legitimize Indian gatherings when traditional ceremonies were forbidden on reservations (1881-1932)

and, since 1918, deploying flags to honor Indian veterans of U.S. wars. Other possible factors—the flag as a treaty token, or the role of the flags distributed by the 1913 Expedition for American Indian Citizenship (*Great Plains Quarterly*, Spring 1993)—also suggest that flag imagery should be more widespread, as indeed it was and is.

The authors' time frame is even more problematic. The first generation of Indian painters using Western media was exhibiting in Santa Fe in the 1920s, but they are missing from this survey. Nor did "Indian art" disappear after the Crash. On the contrary, subsequent generations of American Indian artists have made wide symbolic use of the flag as critical commentary, often with messages quite unlike what Herbst and Kopp see in the pre-Depression period. The Vietnam quagmire forced thousands of Indian men to wonder whether they had become the same soldiers that shot down their grandparents at Sand Creek or Wounded Knee. As Jim Northrup explains in his short story "Veteran's Dance," a dead Vietnamese militiawoman looked the same as a dead sister or grandmother. The flag meant ambivalence, betrayal, and rebellion; it not only appeared upside down on AIM flack jackets but as an ominous wrapping for surreal Indian figures in canvasses by Fritz Scholder, Kevin Red Star, and Phyllis Fife, or as a sardonic cockade on Ric Glazer-Danay's post-modernist Mohawk hard hats. *The Flag in American Indian Art* omits Indian gallery artists' use of the flag to mock American power and justice—thus it is only an *hors d'oeuvre*. The main course missing.

This is not to suggest that Indians' own forms of "pop" art and *kitsch*, appearing in largely anonymous genres such as tourist and powwow wares, are uninteresting social documents. Christian Feest assembled a collection of contemporary beaded belt buckles at Vienna's ethnographic museum—many with flags—that says more about Indians' use and criticism of American cultural icons than many volumes of learned prose. (To this day, I regret passing up at a Yakima Nation powwow a

beautifully beaded belt buckle that featured a grinning caricature of Jiminy Cricket.) The point is that American Indians have responded to symbols like the flag at many levels, from the embellishment of everyday objects to fine arts in Western and “neo-traditional” media. The present volume surveys only a portion of that spectrum.

The reason is plain if you read the fine print. *The Flag in American Indian Art* is a catalogue of two private collections and necessarily reflects the collectors’ individual artistic fancies. While they merit praise for preserving these objects of ingenuity and beauty, and making them more widely accessible through print, it will remain for others to write the book implied by the title.

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