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Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

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Winter 1999

**Review of *Powerful Images: Portrayals of Native America* By  
Sarah E. Boehme et al. Foreword by Peter Hassrick**

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*Philbrook Museum of Art*

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Wyckoff, Lydia L., "Review of *Powerful Images: Portrayals of Native America* By Sarah E. Boehme et al. Foreword by Peter Hassrick" (1999). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1615.  
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*Powerful Images: Portrayals of Native America.* By Sarah E. Boehme et al. Foreword by Peter Hassrick. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998. Illustrations, contributors, index. xvi + 144 pp. \$50.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

This thought-provoking book is designed to accompany an exhibition which, unfortunately, I have not seen. The focus of both the exhibition and the catalogue is the relationship between Native American art and culture and that of dominant European Americans.

Five essays attempt to present the complexities of two diverse contemporary views with distinct historical perspectives. The first pair juxtapose indigenous and European American points of view in a focused and mutually intelligible manner. Emma Hanson examines the art of the Plains and the Southwest. Although her primary concern is the Plains, I believe her generalizations would be acceptable to most Indian people, in particular her concluding statement: "For Native American people today, the object speaks to the spirit and endurance of tribal cultures and provides a key to understanding the past, the present, the people who went before them, and their own generation."

Traditional objects for Native Americans are weighted with meaning; when there is a subject, it is but one of the multiple cultural meanings carried within the object. The contrast between this and the European American portrayal of the Indian subject as exotic, savage, a child of nature, a stereotype created by European Americans is presented in the

second essay, "Frozen in Time: Euro-American Portrayals of Indians."

The third and fourth essays likewise contrast the Native with Euro-American and Canadian perspectives. Gerald T. Conaty and Clifford Crane Beal focus on the Blackfoot (Siksika) and the lack of understanding between this culture and governmental forces, as well as the pressure of modern technology. In "Illusions and Deceptions: The Indian in Popular Culture" James H. Nottage brings to the consciousness of the museum-going public the outrage Native Americans have so long expressed at the use of Indian caricatures in popular American culture. It is these images of war bonnet dressed warriors, buffalo hunters, and shy maidens that have formed and reinforced European American stereotypes.

But at what point does the "preconception become conception and conception become fact" for indigenous people living in European American dominated society? I believe this to be an important issue for contemporary Native American artists, yet there is no mention of it in the final essay, "Native America Artists—Expressing Their Own Identity." Mike Leslie does state that "[Indians] have been culturally pummeled to the point of being presumably unrecognizable even to themselves," but merely reminds us on the following page that indeed there are tribal differences.

It is only in Hanson's essay, I feel, that both tribal differences and generalities within Native American cultures are fully recognized. Although Sarah Boehme shows how European American art went from the tribally specific document to the stereotypes of Western Art, neither she nor Nottage as European Americans addresses the issue of the impact of these collective stereotypes on Native peoples themselves. Surely one of the most important issues for artists today is just this—what does it mean to be an Indian? Numerous painters, and most recently the Native American film *Smoke Signals*, address this issue.

Leslie speaks of both the importance of the individual and individual experiences within the context of "Indian art." But what does the

collective term "Indian art" mean from the Native American perspective? Does it reflect the internalization of the European American assumption that all Indians are alike? Does it mean that "Indian art" is solely that which is Indian made and, preferably, with an Indian subject? Again, Leslie does not take up these questions.

Perhaps answers are suggested in Dave Warren's insightful introduction where he speaks of "a new environment of change and circumstance" which requires "any interpretation of Indian art be carefully evaluated in the context of Native Americans in the new paradigm of national life." No longer passive, Native Americans as a group are demanding self-determination politically, economically, and culturally. This renewal, in turn, allows for tribal and individual differences.

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