

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Winter 2002

## Review of *Collecting Native America, 1870-1960* Edited by Shepard Krech III and Barbara A. Hail

Margaret A. MacKichan

Sinte Gleska University, MacKichan@sintegleska.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

MacKichan, Margaret A., "Review of *Collecting Native America, 1870-1960* Edited by Shepard Krech III and Barbara A. Hail" (2002). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2343.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2343>

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.

*Collecting Native America, 1870–1960*. Edited by Shepard Krech III and Barbara A. Hail. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999. vi + 298 pp. Notes, figures, index. \$45.00.

Setting out to explore the roles of private collectors in founding North American public museums of American Indian materials, the editors of *Collecting Native America* have assembled discussions of Sheldon Jackson (1834-1909), Alaska's best known late-nineteenth-century missionary collector; David Ross McCord (1844-1930), founder of the McCord National Museum, Montreal, which opened in 1921; Charles Fletcher Lummis (1859-1928) of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, chartered in 1907; Rudolf F. Haffenreffer (1874-1954), of Rhode Island's King Philip Museum, established during the 1920s; Phoebe Apperson Hearst (1842-1919), mother of newspaper publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst and founder, in 1901, of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley; Clara Endicott Sears (1863–1960) who created a cluster of museums, including the Fruitlands Farmhouse, on her property in Harvard, Massachusetts, between 1914 and 1945; Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1946) of Santa Fe's Seton Institute, opened in the early 1930s, and Mary Cabot Wheelwright (1878–1958) of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, launched in 1937, also in Santa Fe; George Gustav Heye (1874–1956) of the Heye Foundation and the Museum of the American Indian, established in New York City in 1916; and Mary Winslow Allen Crane (1902–1982) and Francis Valentine Crane (1903–1968), founders of the Southeast Museum of the North American Indian in Marathon, Florida, in 1958, whose collections ultimately became part of the Denver Museum of Natural History during the 1960s.

The book's foreword notes that "the history of these collections is a part of the history of anthropology, and of the history of art collecting and art appreciation (because Native

American materials are now widely recognized as real or high art)." That is news to this reviewer since many of these museums which exhibit such sacred and secular artifacts still do so under the rubric of anthropology which openly expressed a primary belief in the idea of there being such a beast as a "primitive" or "savage" stone-age Indian on the verge of extinction for the better part of two centuries. The book is, nonetheless, a treasure of information on the collecting philosophies, or lack thereof, of some of the most influential non-Natives in the world of the American Indian. And despite the fact that most of these collectors harbored some rather ethnocentric and arcane views on who the American Indian really was, their collections speak volumes about their need to know. Paradoxically, history is teaching us that these collectors ran aground of the very real world of American Indians who today are rewriting much of that part of history from Native perspectives.

I have personally visited many of these museums; however, the Heye Foundation's Museum of the American Indian Warehouse located on six acres of land in the Bronx was especially enlightening and, I think, speaks for them all. The building must be at least half a block square and three stories high. I was given to believe that within its bulging-at-the-seams walls were more than a million pieces of Native art never before put on display at one time for public viewing or analysis. I was fortunate to have been guided through some of that collection by Raymond Gonyea who, as its director, had obtained an insider's knowledge of the place. He revealed Native art that few living people have ever laid eyes on, as difficult as that is to believe. In fact, he related how even the people who collected, curated, and conserved that art did not even know what was there. Apparently, all of that Native art appearing in our popular academic literature is just the tip of the iceberg. Incredibly, whole Indian "libraries" have been stashed away on dusty warehouse shelves in the Bronx—and on other museum shelves as well, I am now learning—for more than a century

pages of anthropological text. This was published in a twenty volume, twenty-portfolio set; fewer than 500 copies were printed. The project had taken thirty years to complete.

Since its rediscovery, editors have gleaned a number of books from the opus, usually singling out a topic or theme from the spectrum available. *Sacred Legacy* stands apart from the general run of these books in two regards. The photographs themselves are treated with uncommon respect, every effort having been made to reproduce the images true to their original print. A four-color process was used to replicate the color accurately, which varies according to the printing process Curtis used: silver, platinum, albumen, gravure, or cyanotype. A final coat of varnish was given to add the depth and clarity found in high quality originals. All of the images are reproduced in this manner, not just the full-page photographs. As a result, the viewer can fully appreciate the detail and delicacy of seldom reproduced images such as "Old Roadway of Acoma," and the luminosity of "An Oasis in the Badlands."

In spite of these lengths, however, the true lover of photography will be frustrated by the book design. Some photographs are enlarged to a two-page size, the center gutter making the photograph difficult, if not impossible, to be seen as a whole. Unavoidable glare and shadow break down the very image selected to be presented in a monumental way. Similarly, full-page reproductions that have no margin run off the page catching light from its curve and oily fingerprints too.

The most remarkable and praiseworthy aspect of this volume is the inclusion of essays by Native American writers. In addition to sketches by the author on Curtis's life and work, N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) and Joseph D. Horse Capture (Gros Ventre) discuss the impact of Curtis's work on their own lives and the living descendants of his subjects. Since the Horse Capture family first saw the print of Horse Capture, each household has obtained a copy, its presence helping to give direction to daily life. It is refreshing and gratifying for

a photographer to be perceived as contributing to a people. In contrast to other writers, Momaday and Horse Capture speak of what is present and on-going. Their voices assure us that here is not a vanishing race as once thought, but a vital people living in the present yet linked to and enriched by these images of an earlier time.

MARGARET A. MACKICHAN  
Art Institute  
Sinte Gleska University