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## REVIEW ESSAY

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### **The Persistence of Vision: Current Issues in Native American Art and Art History**

JANET CATHERINE BERLO

**Lost and Found Traditions: Native American Art 1965-1985.** By Ralph T. Coe. Seattle: University of Washington Press in association with the American Federation of Arts. 1986. 288 pp. \$35 Cloth.

**A Persistent Vision: Art of the Reservation Days.** By Richard Conn. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1987. 190 pp. \$35 Cloth. \$19.95 Paper.

**The Song of the Loom: New Traditions in Navajo Weaving.** By Frederick J. Dockstader. New York: Hudson Hills Press, in association with the Montclair Art Museum. 1987. 132 pp. \$35 Cloth. \$25 Paper.

**Bill Reid: Beyond the Essential Form.** By Karen Duffek. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. 1986. \$12.95 Paper.

**Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth.** By Doreen Jensen and Polly Sargent. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. 1986. \$18.95 Paper.

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Janet Catherine Berlo teaches in the Art Department at the University of Missouri, St. Louis.

**Bill Reid.** By Doris Shadbolt. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1986. 192 pp. \$39.95 Cloth.

This group of books opens a dialogue on some issues that recur repeatedly in any discussion of American Indian art today: issues of tradition, innovation, continuity, and individuality. These are loaded words in Native American arts. They are often used indiscriminately, with implied value judgments. In some circles, "traditional" art is considered more authentically "Indian" than innovative art. In other circles individuality is paramount, with continuity being less important. These divisive labels for Native American art obscure more often than they clarify the situation. All of the volumes under discussion are concerned with the tension between the past and the present. All demonstrate that Indian art is, by its very nature, a dialogue between old and new, tradition and innovation, individual and culture. All insist that the future of Native American art is a hopeful and vital one.

Conn's book, *A Persistent Vision*, is a catalog of the Bax Collection of Plains and Intermountain art at the Denver Art Museum. It takes the issue of tradition versus innovation back 100 years to the start of the reservation era, a time when the tension between past and future was especially acute. The author reaffirms what most students of Native arts already know: that while the reservation period was the nadir of Indian history from many points of view, it was a time of artistic excellence, especially in the realm of beadwork. Conn points out that much of men's art especially that used in military or sacred contexts, did not survive the dramatic upheavals of the end of the 19th century. In contrast, what we might euphemistically call the "enforced leisure" of the reservation era made women focus more on art, resulting in a proliferation and elaboration of beadwork styles. Moreover, decorative beadwork ". . . survived the pressures of the early reservation period because it fulfilled a need. It became a rallying point for tribal identity against a conquering power, as well as a reminder of better times" (Conn, p. 26).

Conn's well-illustrated catalog of 230 objects provides useful brief summaries of the distinguishing features of different ethnic styles of beadwork and examines the intermixture of those styles. It also provides a nice counterpoint to Coe's catalog of art made during the last 20 years, *Lost and Found Traditions*. Coe has assembled nearly 400 objects of what he calls "traditional con-

temporary" Native American art. While this project was a tremendous achievement, there are some curious aspects to it. Coe says that he did not necessarily look for the best art, but sought the general cultural picture (p. 21). This makes for an interesting anthropological collection, but a sometimes unsatisfying book about art. The author complains that "All too often contemporary Indian arts and crafts have been dismissed as pale reflections of once great art forms now gone forever" (p. 15), but his own inclusion of too much work that is mediocre helps support such a dismissal. While most areas are represented, the Southwest seems underrepresented, both in terms of quality and quantity. The Canadian Inuit and Alaskan Eskimo are left out entirely. This is simply inexcusable, despite the author's citing of "logistical reasons" (p. 20).

The text is interesting, and gives the reader a good sense of how the work was collected. The artists' voices are very much present in the narrative. Most work is identified by the name of the artist, which is a welcome antidote to too many exhibits of "anonymous" Indian art.

The other volumes under consideration also share this concern with the individual contemporary artist. *The Song of the Loom* is an exhibit catalog of 83 Navajo weavings from one private collection. Most of these were made within the last 20 years, with just a handful of earlier rugs included for comparative purposes. More than a third of the textiles are stunning representations of sandpainting imagery. Most of these are the work of three related weavers, Despah Nez, Anna Mae Tanner, and Alberta Thomas, all of Oak Springs, Arizona. Unfortunately, the dazzling technical skill in translating these ceremonial images to warp and weft does not come across well enough in the photographs. A few shots of textile details would have been a welcome addition.

Following the catalog of the textiles is a section of brief biographical notes on some of the weavers. It is gratifying that the individual Navajo weaver is finally getting the recognition and identification she deserves. To my knowledge, this has not commonly been the case in other Navajo weaving catalogs. The voice of individuality has now been added to the dialogue on tradition and innovation in Navajo textiles.

Textile arts receive unusual treatment in *Robes of Power*, a catalog of 20 contemporary Northwest Coast button blankets commissioned for an exhibit that toured Australia and ended up at

the University of British Columbia. The volume is innovative in format. It focuses on oral history as much as on art. Each button blanket is illustrated in color, and photos of its designer and maker are included. The artists themselves provide the narrative, and some recollections by older artists round out the picture. While the outsider's general impression is that button blankets, like Chilkat blankets before them, were designed by men and sewn by women, this book demonstrates the permeability of the sex-role boundaries in this art. Robes are included which were designed by men and sewn by women, designed and sewn by one man, designed and sewn by one woman, and designed and sewn by different women. The oral history format helps the reader appreciate the range of aesthetic choices (p. 34-5) and the varying cultural proscriptions involved in the use of the robes. The focus on contemporary examples makes the reader long for a historical study of button blankets; there has been no in-depth consideration of them, though many are known from museums and private collections.

Jensen and Sargent, themselves artists and Native historians, use the term "progressive traditions" to define how button blankets function in contemporary Native society: "It is customary in modern society to assume that to be progressive we must somehow transcend our past, either forgetting it or relegating it to the dusty museums. This book contradicts that customary view by declaring, through the elegant words and skillful deeds of those who make and wear ceremonial robes of power, that the past can continue to serve and guide the present in the form of 'progressive traditions' that would build toward a future" (Jensen and Sargent, p. vi). One aspect of the renaissance of Northwest Coast art and ceremony is well documented in this satisfying volume.

Two volumes under consideration focus on the work of just one artist, Bill Reid. Born in 1920 of a Haida mother and a Euro-American father, Reid is indisputably the most celebrated living Northwest Coast artist. Duffek's book, an exhibition catalog for a show at the University of British Columbia, concentrates on his art, while Shadbolt's longer volume considers Reid's life in greater detail. Both published in 1986, they are, surprisingly, the first volumes on Bill Reid's art. Both are insightful, sensitive explorations of this artist and his work. Both books focus on the large corpus of Reid's work that draws directly from Northwest

Coast traditions. Scant attention is paid to those works not relating directly to that tradition. (In fact the same two necklaces are illustrated in each volume as the only examples of such works—Shadbolt, p. 44, 45 and Duffek, plate IX and figure 54.)

Shadbolt discusses in detail the pivotal years in Reid's career (the late 1950s and early 1960s) when he worked for the Provincial Museum both as a carver and as part of a salvage team that rescued decaying Haida sculptures from the Queen Charlotte Islands (p. 29–36). This work greatly influenced the mature artistic production that was to follow. Duffek divides Reid's work into three categories: copies, adaptations, and explorations (p. 28), and shows how the artist moved back and forth among these categories. Duffek writes of his works that they "extend the definition of Haida art beyond its generally understood boundaries" (p. 27), yet she shows that even his contemporary jewelry reverberates with references to tradition. The inlaid jewelry (Duffek, plate VII) is reminiscent of 19th century Haida frontlets, while the ripple effect of his repousse goldsmithing suggests the adzed finish of much Northwest Coast woodcarving (Duffek, p. 14–15 and plate III).

Haida kinship and inheritance ties stress the bond between maternal uncle and nephew; Reid's artistic bond with his maternal great-uncle, the famed Haida artist Charles Edenshaw (c. 1839–1920) was seminal in forming his own persistent vision and understanding of Northwest Coast form. Duffek observes that although Edenshaw was long dead, Reid "apprenticed himself to the work" of his great-uncle (p. 7). Reid himself says of his introduction to Edenshaw's work "the world was not the same after that" (Shadbolt, p. 29). An acknowledged master in the contemporary art world, Reid's genius seems to lie in his understanding of the careful balance the artist must achieve between following traditional form and exercising individual freedom: "That's really what it's all about. That's why so much contemporary revival doesn't work. You have to push a carving to the ultimate, beyond what seems immediately logical. . . . And you keep pushing and pushing until you finally arrive at that point where it all comes together, where one area relates perfectly to another" (Duffek, p. 11).

As Karen Duffek astutely observes, "Tradition and innovation are not isolated components in art, one belonging to the past and the other to the present or future. Both are parts of a continuum,

and the artist builds one upon the other as he develops his art through experimentation and learning" (p. 28). All of the books discussed here bear witness to the truth of this remark for the Native American artist. Between the Arapaho beaded boots of the 1890s (Conn, p. 37) and the Sioux beaded sneakers of 1982 (Coe, p. 171) stand ninety years of both tradition and innovation. The Navajo sandpainting rugs made by Anna Mae Tanner during the last 20 years (Dockstader, plates 54-57) join as well as crosscut the traditions of men's sacred, ephemeral art and women's secular, woven art. These categories, in turn, joined and crosscut Pueblo and Hispanic arts in previous centuries. Similarly, contemporary Northwest Coast button blankets, sculpture, and jewelry all engage in a dialogue with ancestral arts and current concerns.

Like the rest of world art, Native American art is now and always has been in transition, with "new genres developing out of the contradictions and ambiguities of the present day" (Duffek, p. 27). That is what keeps it alive. As one Indian artist in Anadarko, Oklahoma remarked to Ted Coe, "We've been vanishing for centuries now; maybe you ought to get used to us being around for a lot longer" (Coe, p. 51). The same is true of American Indian art.