

*Sun Dogs and Eagle Down:
The Indian Paintings of Bill Holm*

Steven C. Brown and Lloyd J. Averill

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

198 pp. Illus. US\$35 cloth.

AARON GLASS

New York University

I RECENTLY ATTENDED an exhibit of Plains Indian shirts at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York. Before any critical faculty had time to kick in, I was struck with a sense of wonder, an excited giddiness at the drama and beauty of the decorated mantles. For a moment I was transported back to a childhood fascination with the romance of the American Indian. Sitting down with *Sun Dogs and Eagle Down*, it strikes me that, despite decades of academic engagement and careful scholarship, Bill Holm has never lost that feeling.

Written by colleagues, friends, and former students Steven Brown and Lloyd Averill, this beautifully produced book celebrates the life and work of Bill Holm with the same enthusiasm that Holm celebrates the world of Native North America in his paintings. Holm combines the meticulous research of the academic with the passion of the hobbyist, the dedication of the skilled practitioner with the remove of the careful observer. He is truly a gentleman scholar, acquiring through personal exploration a lifetime of knowledge, with which he is very generous. While most are familiar with his large research and publication record on the Native arts of the Northwest Coast, Plains, and Plateau, this book further reveals Holm to be an accomplished painter,

illustrator, and creator of indigenous-style objects.

Brown and Averill have put together for the first time forty-nine of Holm's paintings of historic Native scenes, most produced in the last two decades since his retirement from the Burke Museum and the University of Washington. The images are predominantly of figures (often riding horses or paddling canoes) in village or landscape settings; half depict Coastal Canadian and Alaskan peoples, and half Interior Plains and Plateau groups. Figures are foregrounded, allowing close scrutiny of clothing, regalia, and decorated accoutrements. A combination of Western genre painting and ethnographic visualization, Holm's "art is meant to be widely seen and enjoyed as a rich repository of information" (ix). To that end, paintings are paired with Holm's own captions – which narrate the scenes and set the historical context – and with Steven Brown's illuminating essay, which accounts for the major objects, images, and events in every painting. Most of the paintings reference specific objects from photographs and museum collections as well as Native materials collected or manufactured by Holm. Brown distinguishes Holm from other genre painters by his attention to historical detail, specificity, and authenticity,

down to the year certain articles were made and the direction of sunlight at certain times of day. Brown obviously shares Holm's enthusiasm about indigenous arts and cultures, and the reader is exposed to their shared wealth of information on everything from beadwork and weaving technique, to nineteenth-century firearms, to regional variations in canoe design and carving methods. We also learn the degree to which Holm's knowledge comes from making objects (from tanned hides and beaded shirts to transformation masks and totem poles) and participating in First Nations ceremonies (from potlatch to powwow). Lloyd Averill's useful chronology of Holm's life and full bibliography of his scholarship reveal, specifically, the extent of Holm's association with Kwakwaka'wakw communities.

The multifaceted nature of Holm's talent and engagement with indigenous arts makes this a somewhat peculiar book, unique in the vast library of Northwest Coast art studies. Speaking of his ability to work in diverse tribal styles, Brown suggests it is "as if he were many different artists and people" (39-40). Without diminishing the deservedly honorific quality of *Sun Dogs and Eagle Down*, I would like to suggest at least three ways in which these paintings – and Holm's various relationships with them – are complicated by the history of European representation of Native arts and culture.

At the most obvious level, the paintings are illustrations of indigenous life over the past two centuries. Holm's stated intention is to create images of Native cultures "as they would have appeared in color photographs ... as if a time-filter were on my camera" (76). This apparently neutral mode of depiction has a history that goes back to the Exploration Age shipboard

artists and runs through George Catlin and Paul Kane to the salvage photography of Edward Curtis. Brown insists that these images are "born not of a romanticized retrospection, but rather of a profound respect" for the subject matter and of attention to historical detail (8). But romanticism in depiction of Native life necessitates neither disrespect nor inaccuracy; rather, it alludes to selectivity of subject matter (no residential schools or pox-blankets) and to the choice of aesthetic treatment (sunsets and stormy skies). The fact that a colleague had to defend Holm's inclusion of European clothing (28) indicates the degree to which patrons of genre painting prefer a specific vision of Native life.

At another level, the paintings function as a rich context for viewing the objects depicted. Like museum life groups, dioramas, and murals, Holm's images contextualize First Nations artworks, indicating how they appeared and were used before being collected. They give students and collectors of Native art a rare glimpse of the drama and beauty of its original presentation. Here Holm-the-camera gives way to Holm-the-author or curator, and both he and Brown speak with the ethnographic authority that comes from years of careful study, experience, and expertise. Holm even posed for study photographs for many of the paintings to ensure accuracy of position and handling of objects; this bring to my mind the famous photograph of Franz Boas posing for the Kwakwaka'wakw life group at the US National Museum in 1895.

The third issue centres on Holm's role as creator of both objects and paintings. His formal training is in fine arts and education, and he largely taught himself to manufacture indi-

genous-style objects based on careful study of photographs, museum artefacts, and ethnographic documents. He also encourages his students to try their hand at manufacture as a way of better understanding the stylistic and technical principles behind Native arts. These aspects of Holm's repertoire are presented here unproblematically, despite the complicated dialectic of appreciation and appropriation when it comes to non-Native creation or depiction of First Nations art forms. What was produced in the genuine spirit of celebration is often received as evidence of cultural theft or opportunism. In fact, Holm has been unwittingly (some would say unfairly) entangled in the complex, contemporary politics of representation, being criticized by some descendants of the very people who initiated him into Native communities. While Holm, in his characteristic modesty, would never make such self-aggrandizing claims, one can understand the animosity of Native artists towards his being credited with the "renaissance" of their cultures. That he signs all of his paintings (at least since the mid-1980s) with a copyright symbol may indicate his very personal awareness of the sensitivities involved in representing Native cultures; he may be trying to control as best he can the circulation of his very reproducible images.

Sun Dogs and Eagle Down conveys, very successfully, Bill Holm's unique skills and talents, intelligence and expertise. He has had a remarkable career as an educator, mentor, scholar, and curator. He helped foster public appreciation for, and knowledge of, First Nations art through his writing, his exhibits, and his example. Holm provided the vocabulary with which artists, scholars, and collectors (both Native and non-Native) engage with Northwest Coast objects and their histories. Yet the discourse of indigenous arts has developed beyond aesthetics and attribution, connoisseurship and historical reconstruction. We are now confronted with the politics of representation and identity, the negotiation of treaties and repatriation. Holm's somewhat problematic position within the contemporary discourse of Northwest Coast art is in some ways a testament to his success at helping to encourage it in the first place. Some will undoubtedly find Brown and Averill's bracketing of these larger contexts and issues refreshing; others will find it negligent. Ultimately, the lack of recognition of the cultural and political moment in which the paintings were created leaves the book appropriately celebratory but out of time – a bit like the paintings themselves.