

BOOK REVIEWS

*The Changing Presentation of the American Indian:
Museums and Native Cultures*

W. Richard West, editor

Washington, DC/Seattle: Smithsonian Institute/
University of Washington Press, 2000. 118 pp. US\$25 cloth

*Privileging the Past:
Historicism in the Art of the Northwest Coast*

Judith Ostrowitz

Vancouver/Seattle: UBC Press/University of Washington Press,
1999. 264 pp. \$49.95 cloth

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POSTCOLONIAL SCHOLARSHIP is committed, almost by definition, to engaging the universals that define identity across a range of sites, with a view to distinguishing shared principles and problems in the ways that culturally diverse societies are being represented, or named, today. One institution that reflects how identity is defined by its imperial imperative is the museum that displays First Nations and Native American objects. If the legacy of imperialism is to be challenged, we should be grateful to W. Richard West, director of the Smithsonian, for his edited collection of symposium papers. In *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Culture*, West presents a collection by Native and non-Native scholars and curators that focuses on their changing roles in working with

Native communities and their objects. The curator's authority is played out through the museum's imperial power, and secures the museum's traditional educational role through identifying and naming the American Indian.

Each of the symposium papers touches upon a facet of the ongoing debate concerning curating Native American exhibitions: the growth of Native-run institutions, the display of contemporary crafts or artworks alongside traditional artefacts, the clash of different narratives of museum presentation; and the limitations structured by museums. Each writer makes clear how curators, as agents for museums, are caught between being more responsive to the public and administrative communities they serve, the cultures and ethnic groups they represent, and the historically determined limitations of museums.

Having fashioned the concept of “American Indian” during the last century, in an effort to naturalize their educational imperative, museums had to struggle to keep it from becoming the source of their own educational undoing. Calls for self-representation and repatriation of objects from Native and non-Native groups both within and beyond the museum indicate that this display of identity is imbued with political and ideological questions. This book presents such questions as an impetus for extending and encouraging expressions of resistance to imperialism by Native and non-Native communities alike.

Yet are museum’s really organizing a “changing presentation” of the American Indian, as West’s title suggests? I am not convinced this was the most suitable title for the book. While West and the other writers do not dispel the American Indian’s sense of agency in defining their own identity, I would argue that the “changing presentation” is the result of changing mainstream attitudes concerning artefact ownership and display. In response to Native American long-served petitions to museums for the repatriation of sacred objects and security of sacred graves, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act passed in 1990 in the United States. Two years later, the *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples* (1992) was presented in Canada. From the earlier depictions of Natives as savages and cannibals – which may be seen in de Bry’s illustrated book *America* (1591) – to the world fairs and exhibitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this book argues that Native agency is about being sensitive to how identity and culture is limited and defined by the museum.

A major contribution of this book is its inclusion of work by Michael Ames, former director of the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia. Presenting several examples of Native involvement with the MOA that show what he has termed an “aboriginal curatorial prerogative” (82), Ames makes explicit the need for museums to involve Native communities in preparing exhibitions and in creating new techniques better suited to presenting Native American culture. Beyond the “changing presentation” theme, Ames argues that museums are implicated in complex, multi-layered, and continually contentious relationships with First Nations. Museums are questioning their authoritative, realist, and objectivist style, which was once considered indisputable. How does a museum address the historically situated colonial project of defining Native culture and identity through displays, and work to become provocative and challenging with regard to its own rights and responsibilities? In answering these questions, Ames suggests that the museum’s authority needs to be reworked to insist upon an authentic Native voice and perspective that guides exhibition philosophy and Native curatorial policies.

With regard to the museum’s changing authority on the issue of Native identity and display, we would do well to study other academic contributions that touch on these issues. The museum’s stance, however, proves slightly different when it comes to dealing with Native art as distinct and separate from Native artefacts. In *Privileging the Past: Historicism in the Art of the Northwest Coast*, art historian Judith Ostrowitz examines case studies in which Northwest Coast historical and contemporary arts are displayed: an

Alaskan tourist destination, and displays at both the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the American Museum of Natural History. Ostrowitz contends that Northwest Coast art is perceived, judged against, and valued almost entirely by curators and audiences for their historicism; that is, for their resemblance to the styles, artists, and art objects of the past. Further, she contends that these contemporary Native arts, though much admired, cannot be compared with mainstream arts, where value is equated with originality and specific breaks from the past. While Ostrowitz suggests that contemporary Native artists are fully aware of the values of Western modernity, and the power of various public venues to define and maintain a canon, Northwest Coast artists are constrained from developing their arts in that direction. She suggests that there remains an imperative for predominantly non-Native museum authorities to possess and display Northwest Coast art as replicas of the past and that the reproduction process is a vital expression of identity and membership necessary for recognizing Native privilege to reproduce the art.

While Ostrowitz realizes the past/present dilemma facing Northwest Coast artists, she omits notable work done by the artists and institutions within the lower Mainland and Island areas of British Columbia – areas that are home to artists and institutions currently addressing the past/present tensions. The Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, the Nanaimo Art Gallery, and the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, for example, are not mentioned by Ostrowitz for their work with Northwest Coast communities. Similarly, Northwest

Coast artists like Susan Pointe, Lyle Wilson, and Robert Davidson warrant no mention. Rather, Ostrowitz repeats her argument that the Northwest Coast art form is canonical in various institutions, limits her discussions to institutions that are canonical in themselves, and provides little insight into questioning their own practices and implications. This is a glaring absence, and limits and weakens Ostrowitz's argument. Much scholarly research within British Columbia provides a more progressive stance than Ostrowitz is willing to consider. Several years before Ostrowitz's work was published, Ruth Phillips (1988, 65), director of the Museum of Anthropology, stressed the need to "better contextualiz[e] historical objects ... connect[ing] the realities of contemporary Native life rather than a mythic past."

Perhaps it was because Ostrowitz translated her doctoral dissertation directly into an academic book bearing the same title that she was unable to re-examine the work's previous limitations. Academic research in anthropology (as noted in West's book above) and in art history (as Ruth Phillips indicates) succeeds in producing a reflexive analysis of the disciplinary limitations and advances in museum and First Nations relations. Ostrowitz makes apparent her limited understanding of the larger issue of identity and of how, for many First Nations artists, art may be a self-defining political act. This is what makes this book a shallow example. If we are looking for critical examination of how art galleries and tourist destinations address the tensions surrounding First Nations identity and culture, one would do best to look past this book.