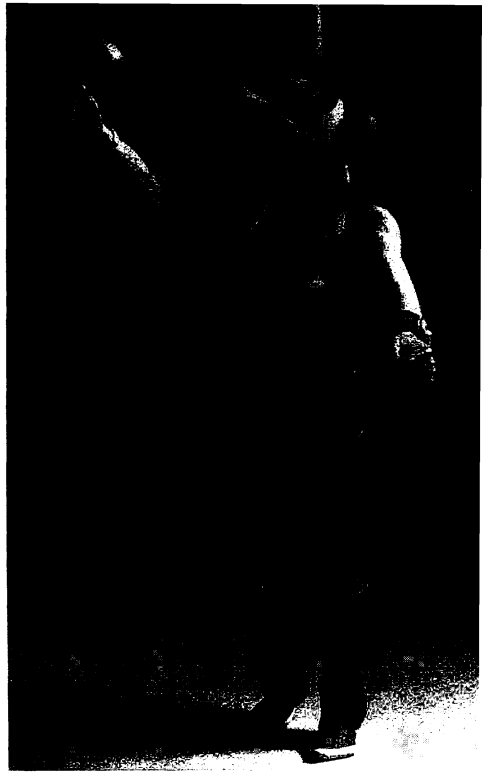


review essay

contemporary native art



LOST AND FOUND TRADITIONS: Native American Art 1965-1985. By Ralph T. Coe. Seattle: University of Washington Press. \$35.00.

During the period in 1977 that *Sacred Circles*, Ted Coe's great show on centuries of Native American art, ran in the Nelson Gallery in Kansas City, contemporary tribal artists and craftsmen worked in the great entrance hall of the museum. Coe had them there to make an important point: the diverse works of art in the show itself were not curios from forgotten cultures long dead. The cultures are alive, still giving meaning to the lives of many Americans, and still producing beautiful artifacts.

Mr. Coe left his work as director of the Nelson Gallery to assume an important post at the Smithsonian, but left that too to devote himself to making us see the beauty and diversity, not to say vitality, of current Indian art. Now his big book is out, and we are richer for it.

Trained neither as ethnologist nor as specialist in tribal arts, Coe has nevertheless managed to avoid the common errors of amateurs working in the field. He understands that it would be a distortion to say that Indian cultures are "thriving," or, indeed, even that one can generalize about them: they are different from one another, and likely to be factionalized within the single tribal group. He knows, too, however, that they are in no sense vanishing, and that their blending of tradition with modernity is culturally no different from the cross-tribal blendings and borrowings which characterized them even before first contact with Europeans. What is critical about an art object is not whether, in the seventeenth century, it was made of beads manufactured in Europe rather than shells gathered on the coast of North America, or whether in the twentieth century it is made of

FIGURE ONE: This elegantly carved Mudhead Kachina (1968) was designed for competitive judging by Hopi artist Henry Shelton. All features except the head-feathers are hand-carved from cottonwood.

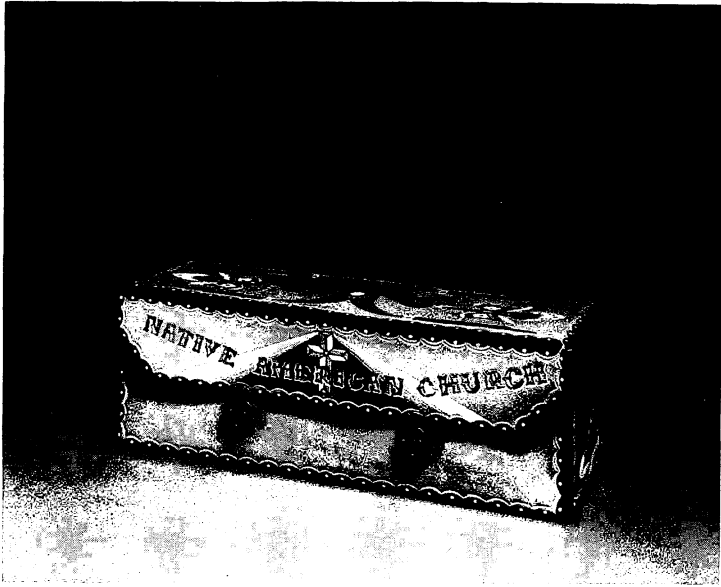


FIGURE TWO: Bright blue with reds, oranges, yellows and greens, this peyote kit is the work of Southern Arapaho artist Johnny Hoof.



FIGURE THREE: Ceremonial drum and carved beater, by Greg Colfax, record a recent event, eye contact between people and eagles in a living room, Neah Bay, Washington: powerful art, living tradition, modern context.

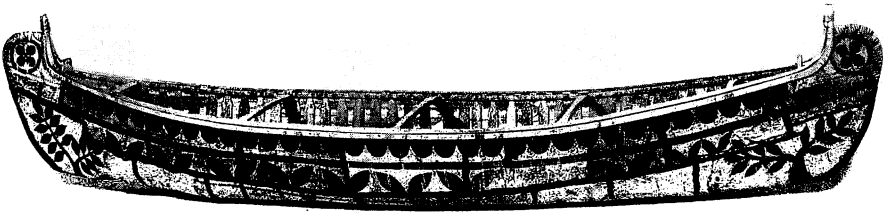


FIGURE FOUR: Manufacture at a shopping center (1980) does not spell cultural corruption. Fur-trade canoes were invented because of interaction between colonial traders and traditional craftsmen. The connection with the marketplace is not new. The result is plainly Mohawk; it is also functional and beautiful.

parts of old tin cans or pieces of plastic: it is the spirit in which it is produced, the uses to which it is put, the way it expresses culture, its beauty. Coe puts it eloquently in his chapter on tradition: “[S]ophistication—education, travel, urban living—does not of itself cancel regard for tradition. The dictionary meaning of *tradition* is specific: ‘the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction.’”

The book is satisfying in format and in contents. Here and there I have little quibbles on matters stylistic or things which a proof-reader should have caught for Ted; beyond those it is a nearly ideal production, honest, comprehensive, modest



FIGURE FIVE: Seferina Ortiz’ pottery figurines are whimsical and topical, but may allude to long-established associations. From Cochita Pueblo, 1984.

and very well-informed. It satisfies curiosity. At the heart of it all is its author's vision: the man left an established career and devoted himself to travelling around—without a car; Ted



FIGURE SIX: Finished with the traditional ground-dung firing technique, this black-on-black pot with turquoise heishi rim (1984) from San Ildefonso Pueblo shows the *avanyu* (water serpent) design established by Maria Martinez.

does not drive—to find out what people were making and to bring together examples of the best. He collected the entire enormous diverse and beautiful assemblage himself. The chapter “Collecting American Indian Art/In the Field 1977-1985” tells how he operated; the frank and detailed captions for the catalogue portion of the vol-

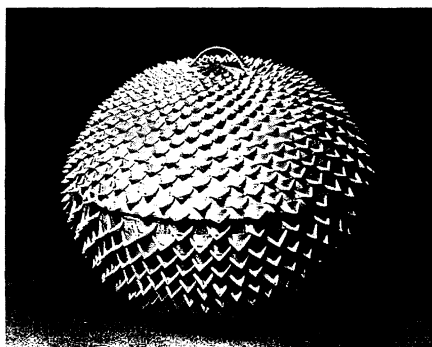


FIGURE SEVEN: Traditional in materials and method, Edith Bonde's porcupine spherical basket (1981) is unusual in elegance and atypical for her tribe, Ojibwa, though she learned basketry from her mother.

ume often contain further information about the method of collection. That is very important, for it helps reveal the social and cultural significance of each work. Beautiful and meaningful objects are found where you find them; rule out those which were consciously made for the tourist trade, utilitarian objects made for everyday use, objects made for you personally as an interested collector, objects from pawn shops, trading-posts and so forth, and you are likely to rule out much that is most beautiful and most impressive. Include them and the process of collection helps define the relationship of art object to the culture that produced it and the relationship between that culture, other Native American cultures

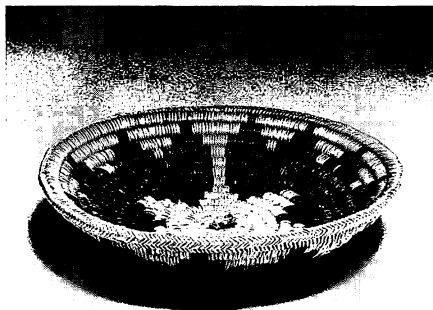


FIGURE EIGHT: Large numbers of these wedding baskets are made for Navajo use by the Southern Paiute. Paiute basket-makers are also beginning to use motifs borrowed from other tribes as well as newly-invented patterns.

and the “ecumenical” culture around it.

By a happy coincidence, the show “Lost and Found Traditions” was at the Landmark Center in St. Paul Minnesota in early May 1987 when MAASA was in town for its annual meeting, and I ran over to see it. It's a commonplace nowadays to say that color illustrations in the book of a show are brighter than the real things. Photographers of art objects have been known to underexpose deliberately to



FIGURE NINE: Alert Bay Kwagiutl mask and rattle (1982) represent a wolf and a raven. In red, white and black enamel, they are the work of Bruce Alfred.

get stronger hues. Not in this case, though, because when native craftsmen want bright colors, they use the brightest colors modern technology can produce, and printing inks simply can't keep up. Yet screaming commercial yarns used in a garment intended for prayer do not constitute a cultural anachronism. Before first White contact, tribes in any one area made use of objects which were not native to their area or to their technology.

Coe told us during a visit years ago to the University of Kansas of his initial regret that it would be impossible, of course, to find a birchbark canoe made in the traditional way. But he did. There are two in the show, plainly functional and beautifully made. Seeing their traditional construction is moving. Cesar Newashish made one at a craft store in a shopping center at the invitation of a Mohawk chief who said that Newashish's canoes "were built right here in the shopping center, but made the right way." The other was made by Stanley Sayazin. Coe found it by asking around; it is a family canoe which was for sale at the co-op. Coe's informant, an Elkland woman, had comments similar to those of the Mohawk chief: "It's made the right way," she said, "no shortcuts." Half a continent away, Coe found a brilliantly decorated leather box lettered to indicate that its contents were paraphernalia for the Native American (Peyote) church, beautifully tooled and itself a representation of the spiritual vision of the religion, available for sale at McKee's Indian store, at Anadarko, Oklahoma. Coe notes that tooled leather is not an ancient tribal tradition, but plainly the object is an important contemporary cultural expression.

The show was beautifully housed in St. Paul. The Landmark Center allocated a number of fairly small separate rooms; the separation helped stress the diversity of cultures and cultural expression. An effective videocassette show let one see craftspeople at work, and talking about what their work means to them. A high



FIGURE TEN: A clan totem pole, as it lay in New Aiyansh, British Columbia. It could be exhibited only because it had never been raised and consecrated. (Once such poles are up, they can never be taken down.) Images depict an eagle, a killer whale, a man holding a salmon, a wolf, a grizzly bear and a beaver.



FIGURE TWELVE: Beads are a trade item; this Crow medallion necklace (c. 1970-1980) also contains plastic hair pipes, rhinestone, cowrie shells and commercial leather.



FIGURE ELEVEN: Resplendant in a beaded outfit of her own creation, Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux) poses for a portrait.

FIGURE THIRTEEN: (Next page): Preston Tonepahote, Kiowa, made this peyote spirit messenger-bird pin in 1980.

Illustrations courtesy of the American Federation of Arts, from the exhibition *Lost and Found Traditions: Native American Art 1965-1985*, organized by the American Federation of Arts (a merging of the Art Museum Association of America and the American Federation of Arts). Made possible by generous grants from Primavera (formerly the American Can Company Foundation) with additional support from the Sacred Circles Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts. Photos by Bobby Hansson.

percentage of the spectators at the show were themselves Native Americans. Heed that fact well: native folks are culturally self-conscious, alert to the implications of this show or any other representation of their cultures.

I find the book a great lesson-teacher, and commend it to readers who are not well-versed on matters of Native American culture. It is a painless way to learn about the subject, for all Coe's judgements are sensible and well-informed, the art objects themselves are beautiful and interesting, and the collection process so revealing of the variety of conditions in which twentieth-century tribal peoples live in America and Canada that it can serve as a primer. As for the handsome show, its tentative tour schedule is

1987	July 5- September 6	Anchorage Museum of History and Art Anchorage, Alaska
1988	October 2- March 6	Renwick Gallery National Museum of American Art Smithsonian Institution Washington, D.C.
	April 13- June 19	Albuquerque Museum of Art, History and Science Albuquerque, New Mexico
	October 9- December 11	Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, Los Angeles, California
1989	April 3- May 29	Laguna Gloria Art Museum Austin, Texas
	June 25- October 15	The Columbus Museum of Arts and Sciences Columbus, Georgia.

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