

BOOK REVIEWS

Northern Athapaskan Art: A Beadwork Tradition.

Kate C. Duncan. University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1989. 224 pp., 44 color plates, 186 B&W illus., appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 (cloth).

Once upon a now-departed time, it was possible for serious scholars to finally attain complete knowledge of all Mankind's history and accomplishments and thus to put each in its proper perspective. But, alas, in these days when new information spews forth from every printing press like an off-shore oil spill, such serene goals are no longer attainable. Thus, most scholars have retreated into a limited, but more manageable, specialization. Sad to say, this has its side affects of myopia and lessened objectivity.

Reading Dr. Duncan's work on northern Athapaskan art forced this reviewer to realize how much he had fallen into this trap. The thought kept recurring, "why, I had no idea there was that much to it!" Previously, all Subarctic beadwork had looked the same. It never will again.

Basically, the book addresses what is known about the history of artistic expression among the Athapaskan peoples of the western Subarctic and how it has developed over time. The author begins by describing the materials and art forms which predate European arrival in the region. These include carving on bone, leather and rawhide objects, porcupine-quill weaving, and embroidery. She is careful to show which of these survive today and how modern examples differ from earlier ones.

Duncan then continues to introduce trade goods and the consequences they held for native art forms. Here we come to beads. Although the book is more concerned with beadwork than with beads themselves, the author does go into some detail about probable dates of introduction and, so far as is possible, what

kinds and colors were available when. With one exception to be noted below, her data appear to be current and correct.

Next, she moves to the introduction of floral design in the region, its diffusion, and finally the resulting regional styles. Here is the real meat of the book, and the author's superb contribution to dispelling the ignorance of those like myself who "had no idea." Duncan's explanations of the hallmarks of each regional style are very clear and, illustrated by the many fine photos provided, become plainly evident.

The most familiar of these for most will be the vigorous, flamboyant Great Slave Lake-Mackenzie River style which predominated all the way from Hudson Bay west into the upper Yukon River drainage. Here are the lavish floral compositions which almost fully cover their spaces leaving very little background showing. Another is the Liard-Fraser style found from Lake Athabasca south and west across the Rockies into interior British Columbia. It is identified by combinations of floral and rectilinear shapes and by a tendency to superimpose one figure upon another. A third is the Yukon-Tanana style found from Whitehorse in the Yukon west into Alaska almost as far as the Yukon delta. In contrast to the preceding, this style is more sparing and formal. Symmetrical compositions leave plenty of background area exposed and we see the familiar little "spurs" on stems which many consider diagnostic of the entire Subarctic. Finally, Duncan describes some minor styles such as the geometric figures preferred for Tahltan and Inland Tlingit beadwork which could be called more florid than floral.

Dealing with the Subarctic region, Duncan had to confront three bead-related questions which are presently not totally resolved. First, there is the matter of distinguishing beads made in Russia from those

made elsewhere. She refers to examples of Athapaskan beadwork from Russian collections, and seems to assume that the beads must therefore have come from Russian traders. Prominent among these pieces one sees the large faceted blue necklace beads which have often been so described. It is known that the Russians did make beads, but there also seems to be evidence that some of their trading stock came from Bohemia and perhaps even Venice as well. It is probably outside the perimeters of Duncan's study to answer this question, but it is to be hoped someone will try to find the answers.

Another matter that is central to her subject, though, is the introduction of floral design. She rejects the idea that everything was due to French influence and says "Sources are far more diverse, with significant roots in the British Isles, Scandinavia, and even Middle Europe...." In a footnote, she mentions more specifically English, Swiss, Norwegian, Icelandic and Galician (Ukrainian) women in the Red River area as possible sources of influence. There certainly were English and Swiss women in Lord Selkirk's colony, but my own impression is that the other national groups didn't arrive in any numbers until the late 1870s, and then tended to live in homogeneous enclaves interacting only minimally with persons of other ethnicity. Today, there is renewed interest in native North-American floral design and a more extended discussion of possible origins and influences would have been welcome.

Finally, there is the much-debated matter of "Metis" beadwork style. Duncan cites historical references to persons so identified in the western Subarctic, but points out that native people there do not so categorize themselves today. These same people say there is, at least today, no difference between their works and those made by others claiming mixed European and Native ancestry. The point made here is that this is a topic calling for further study.

In summary, here is an excellently researched and published book which is strongly recommended to all. Given the paucity of literature on Subarctic arts,

Duncan has gone a long way to clarify identification and dating of objects as well as providing insight into the lives and motivations of the beadworkers themselves. Don't miss this one!

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*Proceedings of the 1986 Shell Bead Conference:
Selected Papers.*

Charles F. Hayes III and Lynn Ceci, editors.
Rochester Museum and Science Center, Research Records 20, 1989. xi + 206 pp., 90 figs.,
20 tables. \$15.00 (paper).

Most of our readership is familiar with the high-quality "Proceedings of the 1982 Glass Trade Bead Conference" previously published by the Rochester Museum and Science Center. This volume continues the tradition of research excellence by presenting selected papers on shell beads from the 1986 conference. The topics are quite varied, ranging from a survey of bead manufacturing techniques by our past president, Peter Francis, Jr., to numerous regional studies on Iroquoian shell ornaments, wampum, Mississippian shell-bead production and exchange, Mayan and Andean beads, Paleolithic beads, and bead conservation. Abstracts of eight papers presented at the conference but not published are included in the volume. The volume is dedicated to the late Lynn Ceci, a pioneer in the study of shell beads, especially wampum, among the Iroquois.

The papers can be divided into several groups: the identification and conservation of beads and bead manufacturing techniques (5 papers); shell ornaments, including wampum, among the Iroquois (6 papers); shell beads in Central and South America (2 papers); ancient Old World shell beads (2 papers); and miscellaneous (3 papers).