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book review of

George de Forest Brush, The Indian Paintings by Nancy K. Anderson

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George de Forest Brush, The Indian Paintings Nancy K. Anderson, with contributions by James C. Boyles, Diane Dillon, Patricia Junker, Mary Lublin, Jennifer Roberts, and Emily D. Shapiro
Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art in association with Lund Humphries, 2009. 240pp., catalogue, chronology, bibliography, index, 20 plates or works in the exhibition (with details) and approximately 170 other illustrations. \$60. ISBN: 978-0-89468-347-3 (hardcover)

The recent exhibition of the Indian paintings of the American artist George de Forest Brush (1854-1941) was an event that brought new attention to his works of indigenous people; it was also a moment that saw the publication of a major catalogue that carefully examined many issues surrounding the creation of these paintings and how they were originally received.^[1] The project, overseen by Nancy Anderson, Curator of American and British paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., made use of many recent studies by Brush scholars who were given the opportunity to write essays for the book. The resultant publication now serves as a model example of what a cohesive, thematic exhibition catalogue can become if handled with intelligence and insight.

From Anderson's introductory essay, "In Choosing Indians as Subjects ..." to the closing "Indians and 'Indianicity' at the 1893 World's Fair" by Diane Dillon, the publication examines all phases of the artist's career. His academic training in the United States and France provided him with all the basic tools necessary to complete his compositions of Native American life. Brush is one among a select group of American painters —others include George Catlin and Eanger Irving Couse—who were fascinated by Native Americans and worked toward bringing their images to the public's attention. A number of the essays in this publication reveal that Brush was often different from artists such as Catlin in that he created "fictions" of American Indian life where idealization and myth making are more important than naked truth. In this, he was inspired by the large-scale historical compositions of academic French painters, including his instructors at the Académie Julian in Paris or at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

Anderson's first substantial essay "Layered Fiction: The Indian Paintings" provides the necessary biographical background for Brush, noting that he traveled back and forth between the east coast and sites where he could actually study Indians. The author is careful to assert that despite considerable debate over the place of Native Americans in American society, there

was "no hint of racial conflict—an undeniable fact of the day— ... in any of Brush's Indian paintings" (17). Anderson notes that Brush's paintings were "anomalies" since they gave no hint of the bitter reality of Indian life; instead they are stunningly beautiful fictions where Brush tried to find universal truths in his models through the situations in which he placed them. Anderson also argues that Brush's studies of the nude, which he had pursued in French ateliers, found their logical continuation in his idealized studies of the American Indian. In an effort to provide persuasive reasons for Brush's selection of these themes, she posits that the artist was in revolt against the increasing industrialization of society, and that his Native American paintings are an individualized protest against industrialization. She further suggests that the Indian is an extension of Brush's identity, a point reinforced by a photograph of the artist dressed in Indian gear around 1925 (29).

With "Brush and the Academic Tradition" James C. Boyles documents Brush's training in the United States, his continued education in Paris (then seen as the capital of the art world), and his growing interest in the "académie"—a posed nude (often male)—the foundation for many of his Indian paintings. According to Boyles, understanding the importance of the academic tradition, as well as the work of respected teacher Jean-Léon Gérôme, was crucial to Brush's development. Centering on this training, Boyle explicates this not as a modernist trope, but rather as a means of transmitting the examples of past generations to the present, thus providing models for a painter such as Brush as he undertook an exploration of new subject matter. This crucial essay helps the reader understand how Brush assimilated what he had seen while he was abroad, making it possible for him to continue working after his return to the United States.

The third essay, Mary Lublin's study of "Living for Art: Brush and his Indians", takes a different approach. Inspired by the large Salon paintings in Paris such as the historical compositions of Ernest Meissonier, led Brush to recognize that wealthy American collectors wanted impressive paintings that could engage a public audience on the same terms as French paintings shown at the Salons. Brush worked on a large scale, although not on as grandiose a scale as some of the artists who inspired him in Paris. His absorption of Salon examples stimulated the artist to create paintings that contained a narrative; storytelling engaged an audience, made the public eager to know more, to pay close attention to what was being depicted in microscopic detail. Paintings such as *The Silence Broken*, where a bird in flight breaks the stillness of the scene, provided a mesmerizing effect while suggesting that Brush was creating an image of a civilization that was about to be lost forever. Lublin notes that Brush's "... poetic ecosystems of 'first' Americans in their natural habitat, as well as his attempts to replicate sensory experience, share concerns with the historically correct re-creations coming into favor in museum natural history exhibitions" (67). This type of examination raises questions as to whether Brush could be considered a "true realist" or whether his canvases, as posited elsewhere in the catalogue, are really mythical constructions devoid of anything real save for Indian costumes. The answer is not contained in this essay, as the author's role was only to advance the issue while leaving it unresolved.

"A Purpose in Every Stroke: Brush's Images of Indian Artisanry," by Emily D. Shapiro, links the painter with a far broader movement of his era than an interest in Native American art. The Arts and Crafts movement that swept through England for a decade or more became a very forceful influence in the United States during the 1890s and beyond. Architecture, room

interiors, furnishings, ceramics, and all types of applied arts were revitalized, leading to an increasing fascination with the arts and crafts of the American Indian. Collecting artifacts, and the contributions of various tribes, became a priority in many American museums as well as the basis for popular articles in journals and newspapers. With so many in revolt against "the crudity of modern times," Brush believed he was in step with the general trend followed by craftsmen and creators as he stressed the value of Indian individuality as found in their crafted objects from blankets to ceramics. Some of Brush's paintings emphasized the importance of this tradition by showing the American natives, as in *The Weaver*, working at their craft. Emily Shapiro thoughtfully expands the parameters of the publication by placing Brush within this larger contextual matrix.

Following the essays with a specific focus on the way Brush created, the catalogue moves toward centering him within the context of his era, a move that is further stressed in Diane Dillon's excellent essay "Indians and 'Indianness' at the 1893 World's Fair." By providing a link to what was happening in the United States at a key moment in Brush's career, the author further shows how he was a figure of his times. The placement of American Indian objects on display, the construction of huts on the 1893 Fair grounds, made Indian objects accessible to a public eager to know more about indigenous people. The display of these materials, as Dillon carefully reveals, made the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition a location where the commercialization of objects suggested a marketplace mentality. Indianness was everywhere "... (serving) as a medium of exchange, lubricating concrete and conceptual transactions" (117). Since Indians were everywhere at the Fair, it was possible for collectors to more fully understand what Brush offered in his paintings. Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show was positioned near the Fair. It was very popular and the Dakota Indians who were part of it were a source of fascination for Europeans as well as Americans. Another role for Brush's art is also suggested, one that is very important to propose. As Dillon posits "despite his devotion to high art, Brush, in prizing the most patently primitive and visually attractive aspects of Indian life, also shared the priorities of commercial exhibitors who traded on the value of Indianness" (123). With this proposition, Dillon intimates another way to read Brush's production against his own desire to be topical and to succeed with images that were desired by potential collectors. His paintings shown at the Chicago fair were, however, his last major presentation of "himself as a painter of American Indians" (125). Although the closing statements in this essay suggest that Brush disliked his American Indian paintings because he considered them as an immature phase in his development, the remainder of the catalogue goes on to sensitively study each painting in this series (twenty canvases in total) in detailed entries that further explicate some of the issues raised in each of the essays.

Brush has been seen as a difficult artist to discuss, as his paintings are seen by many to reflect a popular taste often at odds with the higher goals of serious art. Some of these issues emerge when one carefully studies certain paintings in the catalogue. But the book (and obviously the show that spawned the publication) achieves its intended purpose: for Brush to be seen and studied with renewed appreciation and depth. His paintings reflect much of what American painters were trying to achieve at the end of the nineteenth century—respect and parity with the contemporary art scene in Europe. The fact that Brush achieved this parity through idealized images of the American Indian was to his credit. In seeing these paintings as the products of far larger impulses, and in recognizing how Brush responded to these tendencies, on his own or with the help of others, provides a clear-headed historical dimension to works that were hitherto misunderstood. The brilliance of this catalogue, which is a model of

scholarly intensity, provides a clear way in which an interpretive exhibition can be valued for years to come.

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Notes

[1] The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in association with the Seattle Art Museum, and shown in Washington, D.C. from September 14, 2008-January 4, 2009, and in Seattle from February 26-May 24, 2009.