

Arni Brownstone. War Paintings of the Tsuu Tâ€™ina Nation

Arni Brownstone. *War Paintings of the Tsuu Tâ€™ina Nation*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2015. xii, 143p., ill. ISBN 9781772120523. CAD 35.00

War Paintings of the Tsuu Tâ€™ina Nation builds from the premise that during much of the nineteenth century, pictographic paintings on tipi liners and story robes functioned as the closest equivalent to written records for the Indigenous peoples of the North American Great Plains. Thus, for scholars with an interest in the histories of authorship and reading that extend beyond print and script, Brownstoneâ€™s study will be of particular interest. Indigenous pictographic sign systems are another written form of documenting knowledge and telling stories, requiring alternative forms of literacy. Scholarly interest in this subject has slowly taken root over the last decade (see, for example the work of Germaine Warkentin, Robert Bringham, Brendan Edwards, Heidi Bohaker, and Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair). Nonetheless, Western understandings of literacy are still deep-rooted. Brownstoneâ€™s work is particularly notable because he frames pictographic paintings as both artistic *and* literary. In other words, the artistic and literary are not characterized as mutually exclusive, as is normally the case in Western interpretations of Indigenous forms of knowledge exchange.

For the past 30 years, Brownstone has redrawn more than 50 Plains Indian drawings. Although these are large works drawn on buffalo robes and other animal-hides, he notes that the critical cues to understanding their narratives are often found in small details. In the course of reproducing these works, Brownstone has been able to better understand the overall composition of the paintings and decipher their narrative cues. Much of this book focuses on Brownstoneâ€™s comparative analyses of five key pictographic war exploit paintings from museum collections in the United States and Canada, complemented by readings of related artifacts.

Biographical war records were the most common subject of Plains Indian pictorial painting, and they served a primary purpose of keeping an individualâ€™s proficiency as a warrior in public view. The authors of these documents used a pared-down, economical visual language â€“ a shorthand, if you will â€“ which was intended to be read and readily understood by other members of the Tsuu Tâ€™ina (previously known as the Sarcee) and related tribal groups. Brownstoneâ€™s work carefully reveals the commonalities and shifts in style and content of five surviving pictorial paintings, particularly as intertribal Plains warfare came to a halt at the end of the nineteenth century. This book thus provides important insight not only into the visual communication forms that were commonly practiced by more than 30 tribal groups across the North American Great Plains, but it also provides a â€“translationâ€™ of the pictograph paintings, thus enriching our historical knowledge of the Tsuu Tâ€™ina nation and their relations with other tribal groups, including the Blackfoot, Cree, and others.

War Paintings of the Tsuu Tâ€™ina Nation makes a valuable contribution to the still emerging scholarly discussion of Indigenous forms of literacy, and serves as a model of what it is possible to ascertain from Indigenous material culture as forms of historical record.

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