

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Sarah E. BOEHME, Christian F. Feest and Patricia Condon Johnson,
Seth Eastman; A Portfolio of North American Indians (Afton,
 Minnesota, Afton Historical Society Press, 1996, 171 p., 100 illus.)

Although a book should not be judged by its cover, it should be noted that the "cover" (the physical appearance) of this volume is striking. The paper is of good quality, the margins wide, the binding excellent, and the photographs and other illustrations are well reproduced; it is a lovely book. Therefore, as a coffee-table "art" book, it will have a good market. Yet, the events which precipitated its publication, and the essays contained between its covers, raise some important scholarly issues and it should contribute to a number of academic discussions. I should like to address four such possible discussions in this review: (1) What is the nature of "collections" used for academic purposes? (2) How much license does an artist have with respect to representing indigenous societies and cultures? (3) What is the relationship between text and image in an illustrated publication? (4) How should one characterize Seth Eastman's engagement with indigenous people?

The impetus for this book derives from the sale of the fifty-two graphic works (mostly watercolours) formerly in the James Jerome Hill Reference Library produced by Seth Eastman. In an attempt to maintain the integrity of the collection, it was thought that a book devoted to recording the history of the collection, a biographical sketch of the painter, and a discussion of the ethnographic and historic significance of each work was required. The "Preface", written by Sheila ffolliott and Shepard Krech III, provides a brief sketch of the original collector, the formation of the library, and comments on the decision to sell the history materials from the James J. Hill Reference Library. In my opinion, it is integral to the work and should have been included in the main body of the text. The opening essay by Sarah Boehme and the closing essay by Patricia Johnston are both biographical and, consequently, cover much the same material. Yet, they have slightly

different perspectives and provide different images of Seth Eastman; Boehme's treatment is critically scholastic, Johnston's is largely eulogistic. Christian Feest provides scholarly annotations for each of the plates; his assessment of Eastman as an artist and historian are implicit in his commentary.

Apparently James Hill considered his collection of Eastman's graphic works to be essentially ethnographic and historic, rather than artistic. Unlike his "fine art" possessions, there is no record of acquisition of the Eastman materials, no effort to have them valued, and no indication of public display; they were stored in his library with other "flat" works such as maps. Ffolliott and Krech argue that for later scholars interested in knowing what books - and other scholarly materials - Hill thought significant and which may have influenced his thinking, it would have been important to maintain the library intact (p. xxi). But, the Hill Collection of Eastman watercolours is only a portion (47 of 244) of a set that was used to illustrate H. R. Schoolcraft's multi-volumned *Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. It might be argued the paintings associated with that project should all be collected and deposited in the National Gallery. Yet, the ownership of the paintings was controversial when they were produced: Eastman, Schoolcraft, the printer, and the US federal government all claimed copyright. How they came to be in James Hill's library is not known. So, where the paintings are housed and in what context they are placed depends upon one's personal biases. Ffolliott (a Hill descendent) and Krech (husband of Ffolliott) see the association largely with James Hill, while the present owner (who is president of the Afton Historical Society Press) sees the principal association with Minnesota and desires to keep the collection there. Since Eastman was born in Maine, they could be justifiably housed there as well. In short, anyone who wants them can probably find a justification for possessing them. This means that scholars who want access to material for study are at the mercy of those who have the means to maintain collections. Deaccessioning is most frequently a political and fiscal decision which is sometimes justified by scholarly arguments and sometimes in spite of them.

Most contemporary scholars recognise that there is a process of selection that takes place when an ethnographer or chronicler records an event or situation; one simply cannot write all of what one experiences. Likewise, it has long been accepted that an artist is selective in representing his or her experience. The juxtaposition of events in a single painting is often an effort to convey much information with an economy of space and is comparable to, say a chapter on costume, in an ethnography (e.g., plate 5,

p. 46). The problem with many of the Seth Eastman ethnographic paintings is that he often mixed artefacts from a variety of ethnic groups (*e.g.*, plate 16, p. 69; or plate 43, p. 120). In this regard, we are most fortunate for the commentary provided by Christian Feest for each of the drawings in the present collection.

It would seem that Eastman preferred to do landscape and architectural paintings to those concerned with ethnographic topics. During his first tour of duty at Fort Snelling (1830-31) he is known to have maintained sketchbooks, though they are now lost. Oil paintings produced from these sketchbooks are all landscapes (p. 148). However, he had plenty of opportunity to draw and paint Dakota topics since he was "related" to some of them through a sexual alliance with the daughter of one of their chiefs (p. 3; p. 148). His interest in painting native people seems to have developed after his marriage and may have been instigated by his wife in order to take advantage of the market for such works. It was during his second posting to Fort Snelling (1841-1848), when his wife was present, that Eastman produced the sketches of the Dakota. These provided illustrations for her literary work, and material for oils that were sold to various "art unions"; the correspondence associated with these sales is with Mary Eastman. It would seem that his wife influenced the themes which Seth Eastman painted (p. 10), and that the paintings were produced to satisfy an art market rather than to make a record of Dakota life; consequently, ethnographic accuracy is not to be expected.

All but one of the Eastman pictures in the Hill collection were used to illustrate two publications. It is significant that none of them was painted "in the field" but all were created from sketches, from memory, and for the needs of the publications in which they appeared. Eight chromolithographs based on Eastman's watercolours were published in serial form (and later in a book) along with stories and poems by Mary Henderson Eastman. The ethnographic detail in these is minimal; their primary function is to enhance an emotional state created by a text (*e.g.* plate 11, p. 58; or plate 15, p. 66). In at least two paintings, it appears that "Indian" figures were added to landscapes painted at an earlier date (plate 9, p. 54; and plate 13, p. 62). Others, however, are based on first hand experience and do add to our understanding of Dakota life in the mid-19th century (*e.g.*, plate 12, p. 61). Nonetheless, it seems that the principal concern in producing these works was to reinforce an image that had been created by Eastman's wife's literary texts.

One might expect there to be a closer fit between the paintings done for a scholarly, encyclopedic book pertaining the "Indian" and the ethnography of those people than for an artistic work. Such seems not to be the case with the Eastman-Schoolcraft collaboration. For instance, Eastman's painting of a *medicine* dance was used to illustrate a *dog* dance (plate 18, p. 72), and his painting of Dakota mourning practices is attributed to the Cree (plate 22, p. 81). Also, he painted scenes about events or peoples for which he only had textual descriptions (e.g., "protecting corn" plate 25, p. 86; "harvesting rice" plate 27, p. 91; or "torturing a female captive" plate 30, p. 96). Of necessity, these are fanciful and based upon his knowledge of the Dakota. Eastman also "copied" the drawing of others to provide a kind of continuity of style to the Schoolcraft publication. Generally, he was fairly faithful to the ethnographic content of these works; changing them only by condensing into one drawing what had been submitted in several (e.g., plate 46, p. 124). There is one notable exception however, and that is the addition of colour to a set of Ojibwa pictographs which were originally line drawings (plate 35a-d, pp. 106-7). Given the significance of colour symbolism in native American religion, this is a grievous offense to scholarship. Without a detailed gloss for each of the Eastman illustrations, it would seem that they are of limited use in reconstructing the life of First Nations peoples. They may have greater utility in understanding the politics of nineteenth century publishing business, government, and scholarship.

It would seem that Seth Eastman's prominence as a visual historian of nineteenth century "Indian life" can be attributed to the promotional efforts of his wife and the fortuitous circumstance of his being in the military. It was Mary Eastman who brought attention to her husband's work through her literary efforts and by acting as his agent with the various art leagues. It was she who lobbied members of Congress to have her husband assigned to the task of illustrating Schoolcraft's book. Without his wife's efforts on his behalf, Seth Eastman, as an artist, would be historically obscure.

There can be little doubt that Eastman had some knowledge of native people, especially of the Dakota. However, he kept no diaries of his activities among them, did not mention them in his sparse correspondence, and the references by his contemporaries to his actions with native people are limited to three incidents, all of which suggest questionable judgment. The first is his sexual liaison with the daughter of a chief (see above), the second is the humiliation of the son of another Dakota chief during delicate peace negotiations (p. 148), and the third occurred in Texas when the soldiers under his command killed two Comanche men and five women

Mary Henderson EASTMAN
Dahcotah; Life and Legends of the Sioux

109

after having invited them and others to a fort to discuss a peace treaty (p. 166).

In summary, whatever knowledge Eastman possessed about native peoples he presented in his paintings. However, these must be “read” with caution and the essays and commentaries in this book facilitate such a reading.

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