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**Review of *Blackfoot War Art: Pictographs of the Reservation Period, 1880-2000* By L. James Dempsey**

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*Glenbow Museum*

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*Blackfoot War Art: Pictographs of the Reservation Period, 1880-2000.* By L. James Dempsey. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xii + 461 pp. Map, illustrations, color plates, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

Representational art depicting important historical events has always been integral to the lives of First Nations people. James Dempsey's *Blackfoot War Art* is concerned with the biographical art produced by the Blackfoot-speaking people, the original inhabitants of a vast territory that extended across the Plains of present-day southern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan, and most of Montana. Dempsey begins by situating this art within its cultural context, including a separate chapter on the importance of the "warrior ethic." He then goes on to discuss the art in terms of its artists' media.

Rock art is the oldest surviving example of Blackfoot art, and Áísínai'pi (Writing-On-Stone) on Alberta's Milk River has the greatest concentration of pictographs in the Northern Plains. Dempsey draws upon the work of archaeologists, rather than the Blackfoot, for the interpretation of the figures, tying some of them to historical

events. This important place speaks to the antiquity of the Blackfoot presence in the region and the long-standing importance of warriors.

Pictographs also embellished the bison robes worn by men, the earliest recordings of which are found in the mid-nineteenth-century art of George Catlin and Karl Bodmer. These robes were clearly meant to be worn, and the pictographs were public records of their owners' accomplishments. Dempsey traces stylistic changes during the long record of these hides and eloquently refutes the proposition that the robes were mnemonic devices that aided men in recalling their feats on public occasions.

The Blackfoot also used tipi covers and doors as canvases of war. Dempsey's family connections to the Blackfoot communities have brought him close to the keepers of these dwellings and to their history. The resulting insights enrich our understanding of these works of art.

In the early twentieth century, the Grand Trunk Railroad decorated Glacier Park Lodge in Montana and the Prince of Wales Hotel in southern Alberta with muslin panels painted with Blackfoot war art. These works undoubtedly created an atmosphere of the "Wild West" for the guests. Dempsey cogently observes that by recording their feats of valor these aged veterans were also encouraging the youth to carry on this warrior tradition. At a time when the Canadian government legally confined the people to their reserves, these images became an inspiration for resistance and cultural preservation.

Much remains unknown about this art. What are the stories associated with the images? Who were the artists who painted the events? Did they have a special status in Blackfoot society? How are these works understood by Blackfoot people today? Collaboration with Blackfoot communities may provide some interesting answers.

Dempsey has done an incredible job of tracking down all forms of Blackfoot war art. University of Oklahoma Press is to be commended for lavishly illustrating this work. Without images words would be ineffective.

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