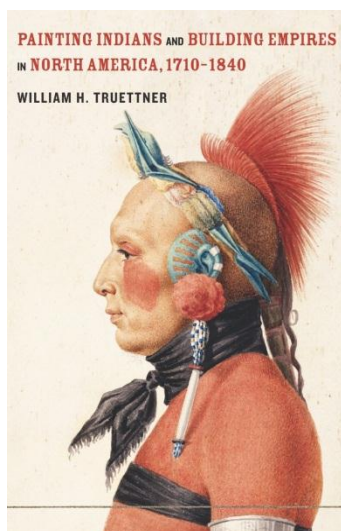


Painting Indians and Building Empires in North America 1710-1840, by William H. Truettner. University of California Press, September 2010. 176 p. ill. alk. ISBN 9780520266315 (cl.), \$39.95



In this absorbing book, William Truettner traces two succeeding tropes for European and Anglo-American depictions of Native Americans. Noble Savage portraits, which dominated during the eighteenth century, were studio works depicting East Coast Indians in hybrid western and native dress. Republican Indian paintings, which came to the fore around 1800, aspired to ethnographic accuracy, and drew upon artists' fieldwork in the West. Noble Savages were emblematic of humane social instincts, and Republican Indians of an enduring social hierarchy. Employing material culture methodologies, Truettner shows how artists and patrons consciously employed these tropes to further their own imperial ambitions.

Truettner is a senior curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and his curatorial eye and instincts are evident. The seventy-three mostly color illustrations are paired and integrated with the text—punctuating it like paintings hung in an imaginary gallery. Reading the text is akin to walking through this fantasy show with a curator who provides historical context, erudite visual analysis, and thought-provoking interpretations of the exhibits.

The twenty-six pages of dense endnotes, where Truettner cites and comments upon a broad range of primary and secondary sources, are a great asset. A thematically organized bibliography culled from these notes would have been a valuable addition—more so than the list of illustrations, which is less informative than the rich photo captions. In the front matter, Truettner acknowledges that his book evolved from a lecture, to an article, and eventually took its present form. There is some evidence of this, with occasional repetitiveness in early sections, and a great swath of material squeezed into the final chapter. One wishes the author could have developed in the main text some of the compelling ideas touched upon in his endnotes. The extensive nine-page index is a bonus.

The University of California Press has produced an attractive, archival-quality publication with a durable red cloth binding and eye-catching jacket. The generous allotment of color illustrations is critical to the book's success, though some are so small, and reproduce original paintings that are themselves so diminutive, that it is difficult to perceive details. This is especially the case with the George Catlin and Alfred Jacob Miller genre scenes.

Truettner has produced a scholarly work of enduring value that should be in all academic and museum libraries. His book is also recommended for public libraries since Truettner provides both a stimulating entrée to painting for history buffs and an illuminating window on American history for art aficionados.

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