

Book Reviews

Women's Work Women's Art: Nineteenth-Century Northern Athapaskan Clothing. By Judy Thompson. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. xxviii, 307 pp., colour pictures, illustrations, maps, notes, index.

The scale and detail contained in *Women's Work Women's Art* reflects the impressive resources of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. This volume marks a culmination for Thompson's career. She has been publishing about Northern Athapaskan clothing since 1987; this book builds on those previous publications. Thompson retired from the Museum just before this book came out, not long before the museum changed its focus and its name (now the Canadian Museum of History). It remains to be seen whether the Canadian Museum of History will continue to devote these kinds of resources to studying First Nations Culture. It will be a pity if it does not, because the value of this volume will be best developed through ongoing relationships with contemporary seamstresses, rather than as an endpoint.

Women's Work Women's Art pays respectful attention to the traditional work of Northern Athapaskan women. It analyzes nineteenth-century Northern Athapaskan garments and adornment. Glossy, heavy-weight paper shows off the colours in high-quality photos and illustrations. It's a soft-cover with considerable heft. Thompson draws from close observation of items in collections around the world as well as historical accounts in creating this information-rich text.

Women's Work Women's Art functions well as a resource book. Equipped with effective indexes, its numbering system points clearly to the garment, map, or archival photo discussed. Lists of correct terms for various peoples, abbreviations, and illustrations open the book, interleaved with two views of a Gwich'in type summer tunic, referred to in a number of places in the text, easy to flip back to. An extensive preface and acknowledgements section recognizes the social process and relationships crucial to making this book. Two appendices appear at the end of the book, one listing the international museums whose Athapaskan clothing collections informed the book, the other a sampling of detailed notes on materials and techniques observed in

twenty-one items pictured in the book. The latter provides a usable template for other students of traditional sewing to follow when analyzing garments.

Many hands make a book as monumental as this. In the preface, Thompson acknowledges Dorothy Burnham, whose many detailed analytical drawings enrich this book. She also describes interviews with many Dene women in the Northwest Territories, naming them and their interviewers. She celebrates occasions of exchange with traditional seamstresses, including visits to the Canadian Museum of Civilization by Yukon and British Columbia elders (including Ida Calmegane from Tagish). Thompson also travelled to the Northwest Territories in the 1990s and 2000, taking part in workshops to “revive the Dene arts of spruce root basketry and babiche bags,” and replicating the Gwich’in summer outfit discussed above. While these seamstresses benefited from Thompson’s ongoing research, their hands-on engagement also helped create the knowledge in this book.

An introduction and four chapters make up the main text. In the introduction, Thompson explicates the importance of clothing in nineteenth-century Athapaskan cultures, not just for practicality but also in terms of meaning. She also establishes women’s central role in making these meanings. The first chapter sets the importance of clothing into the pre-contact lifestyle. The second catalogues all the materials used in the making of clothing, as well as the techniques used with the materials, including diagrams of various ways porcupine quills were woven. The third analyzes major clothing styles and cuts, from head to toe. The fourth explores regional styles for twenty-three Athapaskan groups, organized into three regional subdivisions.

In the fourth chapter, Thompson leans heavily on the historical record for her project of trying to delineate regional differences in the nineteenth century. More direct interviews with First Nations people could enrich this chapter. For a Yukon reader, the categories seem too broad to be meaningful.

Perhaps unintentionally, Thompson locates herself and her reader within a European-derived point of view. As she introduces her focus on the nineteenth century, Thompson clarifies that “the story actually begins in the late 1700s, when the first eyewitness accounts were written” (5). In chapter four, accounts of meetings with Indigenous people in Cook Inlet, written by Captain Cook and his officers, “provide us with our first glimpses of the Denaina” (133). Who is the “us” in this writer/reader relationship? Thompson’s story begins with the entrance of Northern Athapaskan garments into the European historical record. But this story began much earlier for today’s Northern Athapaskans, whose ancestors were there.

If people who practice traditional sewing in a contemporary context can overlook these flaws, *Women's Work Women's Art* offers a storehouse of information. The close observation this book is based on expresses respect. Hopefully curators and academics using this text will work closely with practitioners of this art form, to whose living cultures it belongs.

Nicole Bauberger, Whitehorse

***The Franz Boas Enigma.* By Ludger Müller-Wille. Montréal: Baraka Books, 2014. 188 pp. 38 figures (photos, maps, sketches).**

This is a short but very intriguing examination of Boas's early writings in German and, through this, glimpses of the way he planned his career in general and his work in the Canadian Arctic in particular. Ludger Müller-Wille, in a great partnership with his wife Linna, has been researching and writing about aspects of Boas's work for many years. The eleven Müller-Wille items in the book's bibliography go from 1983 to 2011, all of them pertaining to Boas or his remarkable servant *cum* companion Wilhelm Weike. This amounts to a very intensive examination of Boas's life and work, drawing in particular on German sources.

The Müller-Willes are from Germany, but have lived and worked in Montreal and the Canadian North for some thirty-five years. In much of their work they have used their reading of German documents, including letters and journals, alongside their own first-hand fieldwork in the region where Boas did his pioneering ethnographical study in the 1880s. This latest Müller-Wille publication at times feels a little as if thrown together to make up a book, but it includes new material and a fresh and, at times, moving picture of Boas's personality. It is fascinating to read in Boas's own words about his careful and determined shaping of career; and also of his profound intellectual commitment, as a very young man, to philosophical and cultural relativism.

It is fascinating to think about Boas taking the works of Kant with him to Baffin Island, and important to realize that from the very beginning of his intellectual life he was steeped in the philosophical and scientific ideas of German thinkers who were advancing the principles of human universality and the universality of humanity. Boas arrived among the Inuit with the basis for cultural relativism firmly in place; his discovery of the distinctive genius of the Inuit then confirmed what he was able to see—that there is