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Introduction: Pictures as Documents: Resources for the Study of North American Ethnohistory

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PICTURES AS DOCUMENTS: RESOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF NORTH AMERICAN ETHNOHISTORY

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The following two papers—Joanna Cohan Scherer’s “You Can’t Believe Your Eyes: Inaccuracies in Photographs of North American Indians” and Bernadette Bucher’s “The Savage European: A Structural Approach to European Iconography of the American Indian”—were part of a symposium entitled “Pictures as Documents: Resources for the Study of North American Ethnohistory,” presented at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans in November 1973, the purpose of which was to show how some ethnologists are utilizing still pictures, and the importance of these records as documents.

It became obvious in organizing the symposium that few ethnologists deal with, or are interested in pictorial records. Most interest in visual material has come from art historians (Baxandall 1972), especially those studying symbolism (Vastokas 1974). Art historians have learned to deal with visual material by having as their primary data visual documents, such as paintings or sculpture. In evaluating their data these historians study the various versions, copies, sketches, or prior models in order to interpret the image. They also study stylistic traits of the work from which they can frequently identify unknown works. However, art historians (Baxandall is an exception) are primarily interested in the work itself and not the historical and social circumstances that “created” the work. Ethnologists, on the other hand, have had little experience in using visual material. They have instead dealt primarily with verbal material, either written or spoken. This is despite the fact that the original field situation is a definite visual experience, but it is one that is transferred almost at once by the ethnologists into written notes. As they become more interested in pictorial records, it seems logical that ethnologists should turn to art historians for their methodology. The main difference between art historians and ethnologists is that for the latter the visual image will not be an end in itself but a means to enable the ethnologist to understand the wider culture(s) which “created” the image.

It is apparent to those of us who are working with documents in visual anthropology that, contrary to some opinion, still pictures are not more objective than data obtained by any other means. Because they are nonverbal as well as pictorial does not make them any less subject to speculation or any less open to organization, manipulation and structuring (Gombrich 1960). We must interpret these data just as we must interpret any historical document. This interpretation must be based on our understanding of the motives, intentions, and contemporary culture of the picture maker as well as the culture of the people depicted. We need to understand not only each culture but the impingement of the one culture on the other. We must understand society’s attitude toward the subject and the extent to which the photographer or illustrator upheld these stereotypes of society. Further, we must understand the methods by which the picture was made, the peculiarities and limitations of the medium, the style of its articulation, and the cultural factors surrounding the medium (i.e., how were pictures used and thought of by the culture at a particular point in history). All these have an ultimate effect on how we interpret visual material. Thus no picture, whether artist’s drawing or photographer’s view, is culture-free. The artist draws what s/he thinks s/he sees, what the culture tells one is “right” to see, or what s/he wants to depict, and the photographer selects from innumerable views what s/he will photograph to much the same purpose. Neither is objective.

The problem then is how to deal with a body of anthropological pictorial material that presents unique visual historical data. Part of the problem in dealing with this material is to determine how much the image can “say” without words. Bucher describes the confusion caused by de Bry’s engraving of Timucua Indians sowing crops. There the artist depicted both the European technique as well as the native method, but in his verbal description described only the native method. The image and the verbal information thus conflict. On the other hand, visual material can add information that the verbal description of the observer omitted. Thus in Bucher’s figure showing the Timucua preparing for a feast the artist le Moyne showed the technique of leaching but didn’t understand it. Le Moyne described what he saw “... others [cooks] put water for washing into a hole in the ground” (Cumming et al. 1971:191). Bucher’s ethnographic knowledge plus Cabeza’s verbal description of leaching among other Indians helped confirm the information in the picture. Similarly, Scherer’s verification of Hillers’/Powell’s use of Ute clothing on Paiute Indians was confirmed only after research in manuscript and published sources. Thus, in some cases, pictures include information not understood at the time, but later verified, while in other cases pictures distort the ethnographic facts.

Although these papers may seem different on some levels they are similar in that both deal with pictorial records of the people of native North America as seen by Europeans or White Americans. Bucher’s paper deals with engravings (some copied from lost originals made by European artists who visited America), which interestingly enough show more about the European artist’s perception of the native culture rather than the native culture itself. She shows how they tied into the artist’s own cultural framework, especially into the political intentions underlying the people visualized. The image told something about the Indian’s culture, but was frequently so mixed with European culture traits that it is difficult to separate out ethnographic facts. Scherer’s paper also deals with biases and underlying goals, but of photographers of North American Indians in the late nineteenth century. Thus in both papers the agent who created the
image becomes one of the main focuses in an attempt to interpret the picture.

As it is we have covered but a small part of pictorial records of Indians as seen by Whites, for there are hundreds of drawings and paintings of the Indians by European or White explorers (Gunther 1972), missionaries (Point 1967), and travelers (Catlin 1841). There are also tens of thousands of photographs of North American Indians taken by many types of photographers (Scherer 1970). Further, there are visual materials made by Indians themselves, such as the numerous winter counts (Howard 1960), signatures on treaties and deeds (Feest 1973), and pictorial interpretations of religion or other aspects of their experience (Ewers 1972). Each of the above materials, although unique, can be analyzed in much the same ways as those described in these papers.

The papers presented are attempts by anthropologists to develop methodologies to deal with pictures as documents, and to discuss some of the problems encountered in using visual material. This attempt is vital and more of our research methods utilize visual techniques. Visual documents have to be dealt with, and it is somewhat unfortunate that only as we are being virtually inundated by visual data (still pictures as well as motion picture footage) are we even beginning to think of the material as primary documents. It is hoped that the following articles will stimulate other anthropologists to use and experiment with methodologies for better utilization of pictorial materials in anthropological research.

NOTES

1 I use the term "still pictures" to include photographs (including all the early forms such as the daguerreotype, ambrotype, tintype, stereograph) as well as paintings in whatever medium (oil, watercolor, pen and ink, pencil) and woodcuts, engravings, and lithographs. The latter were sometimes, but not always, based upon an original source such as a sketch or painting.

2 Ethnologists such as Bateson and Mead (1942) or Collier (1967) who have used still and motion picture film are, of course, the major exception.

3 An example of the use of the same methodology is as follows. The study of stylistic traits is used in art history to identify the works of a painter and can be applied in the same way to identify a photographer. Photographers such as Adam Clark Vroman or William Henry Jackson, who both photographed North American Indians in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had distinctive portrait styles for arranging their subjects, typical backgrounds and even limited specific studio props (Pilling n.d.). Thus, even if unaccompanied by written documents, we can sometimes identify a photographer or date span by studio furnishing, props, or portrait style.

REFERENCES CITED


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Gunther, Erna 1972 Indian Life on the Northwest Coast of North America as Seen by the Early Explorers and Fur Traders during the Last Decade of the 18th Century. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.


