

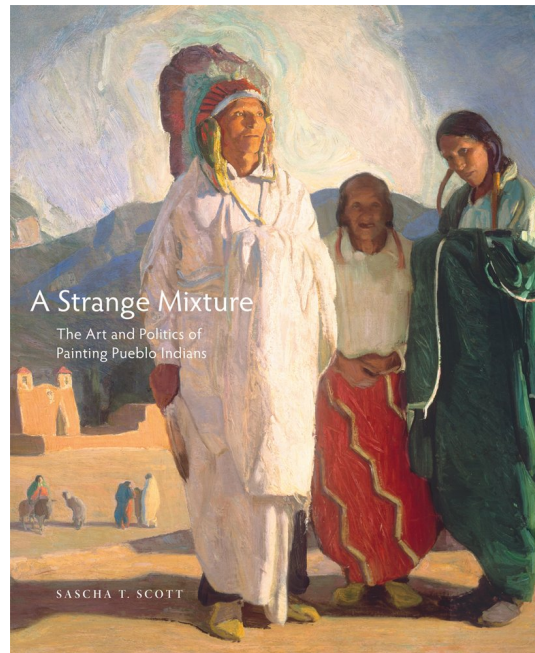


# PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

ISSN: 2471-6839

## *A Strange Mixture: The Art and Politics of Painting Pueblo Indians*



Sascha T. Scott

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015

280 pp.

58 color and 30 B&W illus.

ISBN: 9780806144849

\$45.00

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Emily C. Burns. "Review of *A Strange Mixture: The Art and Politics of Painting Pueblo Indians*." *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 3 no. 1 (Summer, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1596>.

Representations of American Indians occupy uneasy and troubled spaces throughout national art and visual culture as the result of the history of the United States settler colonialism.<sup>1</sup> As several art historians have explored, art often reinforced United States expansion and discourses of manifest destiny.<sup>2</sup> But historian James C. Scott has written, “the public transcript is not the whole story.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Sascha T. Scott argues in *A Strange Mixture: The Art and Politics of Painting Pueblo Indians*, non-Native artists were not uniformly complicit in naturalizing United States expansion. Instead, her close look at paintings of Pueblo peoples in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals that objects also challenged the inevitability of expansion and so-called progress. These paintings sometimes supported dominant cultural narratives and reinforced racist belief structures. Yet, the artists’ personal politics and elisions between selves and subjects express a greater complexity that also rejected existing political structures calling for the complete assimilation of Native American cultures. In the process, these images encouraged contemporaries to “think about Indians in new ways.” (37) This intervention is the key contribution Scott’s nuanced analysis makes to the dialogue between art and United States-Pueblo relations between 1898 and 1930. Scott argues that the objects she analyzes in this collection of case studies are “strange,” unsettling, and uncomfortable. She attributes a visible uneasiness in these representation to complicated relationships between non-Native artists, indigenous Americans, and at times, Hispanic Americans, and considers how such “strangeness can be disruptive, even politicizing.” (4)

By analyzing this “strangeness,” Scott seeks to uncover “how these objects unsettled standard assumptions about Indians and bolstered a political movement for Native rights.” (4) The author engages in a detailed discussion of the political history of the attempts by the United States government to assimilate Pueblo peoples and acquire indigenous land before the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. This context frames her interpretation of the role of aesthetics in a social movement that resists policies seeking to erase Pueblo culture. She pairs this clearly articulated political and social history with in-depth research on several artists.

The book features five full chapters and an epilogue that each concentrate on a single object as a point of entry into the complicated relationship between art and politics raised by representations of Pueblo peoples and landscapes. The objects span a thirty-year period and include a late nineteenth-century illustration in *Harper’s Weekly* and a 1921 painting by Ernest Blumenschein, a New Mexico Landscape by Marsden Hartley dated 1919-23, a John Sloan painting of a Pueblo dance from 1922, and an abstract painting by Pueblo artist Awa Tsireh from 1925-30. The introduction tackles the complexities of American Indian politics and the importance of levels of (in)visibility through a reading of Mateo Romer’s painting *Primogeniture* (1997; School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe), and the epilogue analyzes Georgia O’Keeffe’s imaginative abstraction *At the Rodeo* (1929; Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe) in response to a Pueblo dance

performance. These bookends situate these paintings within their fraught political context and offer a long view of artists' troubled attempts to visualize Pueblo culture.

In Scott's narrative, objects are not merely about power, appropriation, and domination, but also about resistance. Yet spaces for contestation or alternative narratives are often subtle and inconsistent. As she argues, "Even as artists attempted to challenge dominant social and political ideologies, their paintings reveal that they were ultimately entangled with and dependent on these same forces." (6) Scott's case studies reveal multiple simultaneous narratives and profound ambivalences, in which she revels and uses to show the complicated structure of racial and cultural assumptions. For example, Scott argues that Hartley's vibrant red abstractions of New Mexico landscapes embody the "Red Man." (47) This artistic metaphor is marked by both a hierarchical and primitivist appropriation of Pueblo peoples and investments in safeguarding Pueblo culture by protecting ceremonial dance. While these reading of Hartley's paintings and his perspectives are contradictory, this makes them no less urgent as cultural indicators. Scott unpacks the layers of ambivalence, disruption, and strangeness in her chosen case studies.

The narrative of the book implies three main subject positions: those who supported assimilation; non-Native observers who adopted a preservationist stance toward Native American communities, or what Sherry L. Smith has called "popularizers"; and Native individuals who also stood for the cause of preservation.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the shifting viewpoints of these individuals over time, Scott observes that while Pueblo peoples and non-Native preservationists shared a goal of Pueblo cultural continuance, their reasons were divergent. Pueblo Indians, Scott argues, countered "attacks on their sovereignty" (7) through acts of survivance, while non-Native preservationists "problematically claimed the authority to determine what was authentic and worth saving" in Pueblo culture.<sup>5</sup> (6) Scott explains the conflicted position of the latter group, who "advocated for Pueblo political rights in the present while attempting to safeguard Pueblo culture by freezing it in the past." (6) The author works to read representations of Pueblo peoples beyond a simple primitivist frame, noting that "primitivist rhetoric is neither monolithic nor static and shifts based on location and context." (10) Instead of shutting down conversation by regarding these works as merely clichéd, exoticizing appropriations, this claim widens the interpretive possibilities for her case studies. While the non-Native artists under discussion did not necessarily believe in racial equality, the earnest engagement of "popularizers" enacted cultural appropriation and critique simultaneously. As Scott argues, "The paintings and illustrations featured in this book do more than evince objectification and exploitation—these pictures are stranger and more ambivalent than that." (6)

Scott's analysis interprets "strangeness" as a mechanism that allowed artists to grapple with the complex identity positions of the peoples of the Southwest. But how does one describe strangeness? For each

chapter, there are different registers around which Scott locates the strange, ranging from the use of language to stylistic choice and intervention, engagements with phenomenological experience and the projection of the artist body onto the subject, and the contexts of display and performance, particularly dance, as well as the visibility of the structures of ethnic tourism. Through her study of strangeness, readers can trace parallels between Blumenschein's description of the Pueblo and Hispanic communities and Anglo tourists in the Southwest as a "strange mixture" and O'Keeffe's description of the Southwest as a "strange hast" ... "all so many things mixed up together that is quite impossible to tell of..." (17-18; 190) These connections supersede the distinct stylistic languages preferred by the artists.

Scott's case studies put into conversation a range of stylistic approaches, from traditional academic approaches to painting and illustration extending from French Beaux-Arts traditions, to modernist abstraction and Pueblo painting. Scott levels traditional disciplinary boundaries between academic and modern art, and between the art of the United States and Native American art. *A Strange Mixture* shows that ambiguity and "strangeness" exist regardless of aesthetics, due to the pervasive shared discourse around United States-Pueblo relations. In this close intertwining between painting and politics, aesthetics reveal social outlook and intervention, while politics become estheticized. By coming the work of Pueblo painter Awa Tsireh with Hartley's and O'Keeffe's phenomenological abstractions and Blumenschein's and Sloan's more naturalistic interventions, Scott locates multiple modernities at work simultaneously. (10) As she claims in the introduction, this structure "accentuates the strangeness of aesthetic categories like 'academic' and 'modernist.'" (9) This statement prepares the reader for semantic difficulties, but it might be brought to bear more clearly within the individual chapters. For example, the vicissitudes of Blumenschein's style raise some confusion. In contrast to *The Peacemaker* (1913; American Museum of Western Art – The Anschutz Collection, Denver), Scott interprets *The Gift* (1922; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC) as a "serious engagement with postimpressionism, especially the work of Paul Gauguin, in its style, challenge to mimetic representation, and emphasis on visual ambiguity." (78) Yet she later declares it "an academic painting that ultimately appealed to conservative critics in the East" because "no matter how dense his brushwork, no matter how ambiguous his figures, no matter how bold his hues, *The Gift* is a picture of a posed Indian model." (108) To my eye, save a slightly brighter palette, *The Gift* does not bear a significant stylistic departure from earlier paintings, such as *The Peacemaker*. Both appear to have thick facture and emphasize flatness by juxtaposing a figure or group of figures in the near foreground against background planes. Scott argues that *The Peacemaker* "adhered to academic standards in its interest in mimetic representation, symbolic legibility, and romanticizing tenor." (89) Yet *The Peacemaker* also employs narrative ambiguity through the dizzying juxtaposition between figures and distant perspective, and a composition that plays with identity and representation, as in *The Gift*. In seeking to define where these objects exist on a spectrum from academic art to Post-Impressionism, Scott becomes mired in unnecessary attempts to

categorize the artist's style. The discussion acts out the limitation of stylistic monikers in interpreting modernism that she mentions in the introduction. Perhaps more useful here is a definition of modernism that does not assume abstraction; instead, to draw from David Peters Corbett's analysis of the urban realism of the Camden Town Group, modernism can be about experiments with "the visual possibilities of painting as fiction."<sup>6</sup> Modernist intervention can be iconographic as much as stylistic. Understanding modernism as recognizing the constructed nature of the painted surface would enable Scott to escape the limiting structures of academic, modern, and "ultramodern." It would also allow the author to more fully realize her goal to level the playing field between the works of Blumenschein and Sloan, and the abstract paintings of Hartley and O'Keeffe. Her analysis does, for example, emphasize the paintings by Blumenschein and Sloan, whose interventions expose the structures of picture making as much as more abstract paintings, as seen in Blumenschein's *The Peacemaker* and Sloan's *Grotesques at Santo Domingo* (1923/26; Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach) and *Southwest Art (Rolsboven Painting an Indian)* (1920; American Museum of Western Art—The Anschutz Collection, Denver). Regardless of these challenges with stylistic language, the project makes clear that artists were all stretching their aesthetic practices and vocabularies to try to accommodate contradictory experiences and perspectives in the Southwest.

Scott's rhetorical framing and analysis of each object opens up possibilities for complex and ambiguous readings. Her extended visual analysis achieves persuasive and subtle interpretations of slippery objects and concepts, but at times her use of declarative instead of conditional language makes the argument seem too insistent. For instance, in interpreting Blumenschein's longstanding signature as evocative of Pueblo architecture, Scott's claim that "his lettering took on new meaning in his representation of pueblo subjects" is suggestive argument, but not fact. (18) While her rich, careful observation pushes the reader to repeatedly return to the objects for more detail, her often persuasive interpretations of visual details would benefit from gentler language and greater ambiguity. This flexibility would reinforce her larger argument regarding the instability and multivalent discourses of these objects. Finally, Scott's interpretations are generally built on artistic intention and her visual analysis of the strangeness in each object; more details about the reception of these objects would further solidify her argument.

Another of the book's important contributions is the inclusion of San Ildefonso artist Awa Tsireh, whose work visualizes the Pueblo from the perspective of a Pueblo artist. Chapter five, "Awa Tsireh and the Art of Resistance," enables Scott to engage more fully with Native American studies and, particularly, ideas of survivance. It offers a wonderful interpretation of the possible reactions of one artist to the prying eyes of other artists featured in the book. But it also raises questions about the tensions created between the passive subjects of Blumenschein, Hartley, and Sloan, and the active subjects of Awa Tsireh, enhanced by Awa Tsireh's own artistic agency. I wonder how the book might read if Awa Tsireh's works were presented first in

the volume, as a frame to the project, before that of his visiting contemporaries. While Scott points out that some of Sloan's subjects "are not presented as passive hapless victims," discussion of Awa Tsireh's career raises questions about the non-Native artists' subjects, particularly of Blumenschein and Sloan. (138) Who were their models? Are there ways in which interactions between sitters and artists might have created alternative or disruptive narratives that also shaped these paintings?<sup>7</sup> In other words, can Pueblo presences and transculturation also be found in the work of the non-Native artists? What are the "hidden transcripts" here?<sup>8</sup> Historian David A. Chappell has cautioned about creating too strong a dialectic between passive victim and active agent.<sup>9</sup> The agency given Awa Tsireh in the final chapter incites my desire for more discussion of active acts by sitters at the Taos artists' colony, even if based on fragmentary evidence. In the chapters on non-Native artists some Native American political actors come to the fore, but I also wonder whether any boarding school-trained Pueblo intellectuals acted as intermediaries, akin to those in the Lakota communities in the decades before this history.<sup>10</sup> On a related point, Scott focuses on Awa Tsireh's role in selectively giving and guarding sacred Pueblo knowledge, but what about his sitters? Are they more or less exoticized than those in paintings by non-Native artists? In many cases, they seem no more individuated than those pictured in the rest of the chapters. In addition to deliberately safeguarding tribal knowledge, to what extent is Awa Tsireh also playing with ideas of the exotic, informed by expectations of white audiences? While these questions are unanswered here, in drawing a range of voices and figures together in *A Strange Mixture*, Scott creates a springboard and useful interpretive framework for future scholarship to delve into such questions.

The book itself is beautifully produced, with color images and details throughout that Scott uses to unpack her extended visual analysis. As a scholarly monograph, following the Chicago Manual of Style option to include a full bibliography and short form in the footnotes, I found the structure required added labor in flipping between footnotes and bibliography to get a sense of the source material used by the author for the modest gain of lighter footnotes.

Scott's discussion reveals the intricacies of a fierce public discourse in the 1910s and 1920s about hybridity, the complicated role of Native and Hispanic American communities within the fabric of the United States, and cultural and religious pluralism that was charged through aesthetics. In our current moment, when public discourse heatedly debates and questions who is and is not American, Scott's work reveals the extent to which xenophobia and constructed hierarchies have long been part of the fabric of United States nation building, while also highlighting the tremendous power of visual culture to intervene.

My thanks to Naomi Slipp, Valerie Ann Leeds, and Emily Voelker for their suggestions and edits.

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<sup>1</sup> See Frederick E. Hoxie, “Retrieving the Red Continent: Settler colonialism and the history of American Indians in the US,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 6 (2008): 1153–1167; and Walter S. Hixon, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> William Truettner et al., *West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Museum of American Art, 1991); Susan Scheckel, *The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Shari Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Sherry L. Smith, *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans through Anglo Eyes, 1880–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>5</sup> For a summation of the idea of survivance, see Gerald Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1-23.

<sup>6</sup> David Peters Corbett, “City Visions: The Urban Scene in Camden Town Group and Ashcan School Painting,” in *The Camden Town Group in Context*, ed. Helena Bonnett, Ysanne Holt, and Jennifer Mundy (London: Tate Research Publication, 2012). <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/david-peters-corbett-city-visions-the-urban-scene-in-camden-town-group-and-ashcan-school-r1104351>, accessed August 25, 2015. See also the introduction in David Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Adria L. Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the T.S. Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xii.

<sup>9</sup> David A. Chappell, “Active Agents vs. Passive Victims: Decolonized Historiography or Problematic Paradigm?” *Contemporary Pacific* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 309.

<sup>10</sup> Kiara Vigil, *Indigenous Intellectuals: Sovereignty, Citizenship and the American Imagination, 1880–1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).