

BOOK REVIEWS

PLAINS INDIAN PAINTING, A Description of an Aboriginal Art, by *John Canfield Ewers*
Pp. xiv-84. Pls. 45. Stanford University Press, London, Humphrey Milford, Oxford
University Press. \$4.50.

The ordinary monograph on American Indian art and technique has no esthetic appeal to the artist or the average reader. Small, paper-backed, published in a scientific series, it is written by and for the specialist. Rare and welcome are a few recent works which are not only sound, informative, thorough and accurate, but also attractively printed and bound, and well illustrated. Such a one is John Canfield Ewers' "Plains Indian Painting". Its forty-five full-page plates, voluminous references, bibliography and index make it a valuable reference alike to the anthropologist and to the artist.

As brought out by Mr. Ewers in his chapter on "Hide Painting in Other Parts of Aboriginal America", this mode of art expression was common over most of the two Americas, but reached its apogee among the Indians of our Great Plains, especially the Siouan-speaking tribes, and particularly the Mandan and the Teton. A lost art today, all the finest examples are in museums, which were combed by the author, and all known examples studied. He also waded through the many original sources and the more recent prosaic monographs to secure the data for his important chapters on "Technique" and "History". His illustrations are mainly of museum specimens, a few taken from other publications and original source books.

The designs are either geometric or representative-pictorial. Mr. Ewers notes the interesting fact that, in all cases where the details are available, the former are the work of women, the latter of men.

The University Museum played a large role in the preparation of this work. All our pertinent specimens were studied, many mentioned and one reproduced. The author accepts H. U. Hall's classification of the paintings with life forms into the three classes: time-counts or calendars, personal records or biographies, and imaginative records of visions.*

In Appendix B, "Some Painted Buffalo Robes of Doubtful Origin", he discusses a type of robe first described by B. W. Merwin** and comes to the conclusion that they are not purely aboriginal.

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* H. U. Hall, "A Buffalo Robe Biography". The Museum Journal, XVII, 1, 1926.

** B. W. Merwin, "Some Ojibway Buffalo Robes", The Museum Journal, VII, 1, 1916.

THE MUSEUM IN AMERICA, by *Laurence Vail Coleman*. Pp. viii-711 with illustrations. Washington, The American Association of Museums.

This three volume "Critical Study" will, assuredly, be widely and constantly read by all who have an interest in museums, not only in America, but wherever the concept of a museum as an active educational force rather than a depository of curiosities, or means for gaining immortality, is established. For each of us who is concerned with every day museum tasks it is further a veritable vade mecum and, as with the author's earlier works, this study will have inestimable usefulness as a reference book on many scores. The author, as well as the Carnegie Corporation which aided in its production, is to be in every way congratulated upon its appearance. It should be, especially, prescribed reading, however, for two classes of people who, for one reason or another, concern themselves with museums. The first of these is the prospective donor or testator—of buildings, of endowments, of collections, and even of individual objects. Could these be persuaded to read Mr. Coleman's volumes from cover to cover, study them and dwell upon their contents, many of the difficulties which have arisen in the past (and are doubtless lurking even today in worthy testaments) might be avoided. The author wisely points out "that the wealthy collector and collector-trustee have been largely responsible for the very existence and growth of most museums" but if the type of individual to which he refers had had the advantage, years ago, of reading his pages, some of the hampering influences, under which the majority of our elder museums labor, might have been avoided.

Yet it is for the second class especially that your reviewer believes these volumes should be prescribed reading. These are the trustees of museums. The really good trustee has become a rarity; maybe he seldom existed, unless he was of the class of collector-trustee mentioned above. But particularly now, he *should* exist, and Mr. Coleman is all too moderate, in discussing the duties of the ideal trustee, in his castigation of those trustees who only *serve* while staffs stand round and wait—for the constructive aid only trustees can give. If the museum in America is on the decline—and it must be confessed Mr. Coleman's volumes strike a high note to disprove this dreary thought—the fault lies with lax boards: it is possible, indeed, that with the press of daily and exacting tasks, boards, as constituted in the past, boards drawn from men of affairs, cannot be expected to function as institutions used to count upon their functioning. Boards with a fresh viewpoint must then be created. One might easily interpret this plaint to be based upon the average board's failure to raise money to carry out pet schemes of the administration: it is not this at all; what we want—we whose daily task it is to see that a museum functions effectively—is the same interest from each and every trustee that he would give to any business or corporation in which he had a financial stake. Most trustees—by no means all—are meticulous in attending monthly meetings, but how rare is the one who

stops by each fortnight, say, for a talk with the director or with the curators in order to get an idea of what in general is going on or if the institution (which he among others directly holds in trust for the public) is functioning properly. His obligation is actually very great, the more so because it is entirely impersonal, yet, one ventures to say, the average trustee spends at the museum a fraction—if any—of the time he spends on far less fundamentally important concerns.

We did not intend this review, for which but little space was allotted, to develop into so long or so harsh a diatribe. Yet perhaps it is an indication of the quality and usefulness of the volumes under consideration that they definitely provoke thought and expression of ideas.

Mr. Coleman in subtitling his work "A Critical Study" merely chose to quote from Johnson's Dictionary: "Critik, An Examiner." The present writer would like to turn to the same source: ". . . reviewers, I believe often review without reading the books through; but lay hold of a topick and write chiefly for their own minds." The first of these allegations is denied; the second is probably true, but the present writer hopes, having done so, there may be use in it.

H. H. F. J.