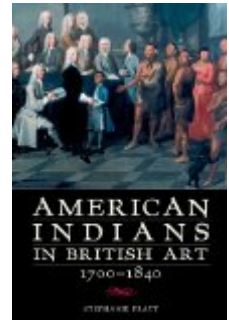


Stephanie Pratt. *American Indians in British Art 1700-1840*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. ix + 198 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8061-3657-8.



Reviewed by Kendra Wormald

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American Indians in British Art 1700-1840 is a bold attempt by Stephanie Pratt to bring current scholarship on visual portrayals of the American Indian up to date with comparable work on certain British depictions of "the other," most often the "black" or "Oriental." Her choice of topic arises not only from her personal connection to it as a Dakota woman, but also from a desire to add to current investigations by notable scholars into the construction of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British empire and the relationships that that empire held with the native peoples of her colonies. By purposely taking a synoptic overview of a variety of different materials situated in different contexts, Pratt sets a chronological framework, spanning 140 years, to "reveal the ways in which American Indians were imaged by British artists in a relatively neglected era and [to see] how these images fit into a larger pattern of perceptions, concepts, understandings and misunderstandings" (p. 5).

Pratt contends that the traditional scholarly reliance on the popular concept of the noble savage to gain insight into eighteenth- and nine-

teenth-century British perceptions of the American Indian is in need of severe modification. According to Pratt, the noble savage is only one theme that did indeed make its appearance but was often subjected to the influence of very real historical circumstances. The period under consideration is one where Indians and Europeans not only occupied their own lands, but coexisted in what Pratt calls a "middle ground," the liminal space between the territories of each culture where trade flourished and a new culture developed. She argues that a tension therefore arose in European visual culture between the "allegorical positionings of America and its inhabitants, on the one hand, and realizations of the historically contingent impact of actual American Indian groups, on the other" (p. 6).

Pratt is sure to point out that she is not looking for the "truth" behind the paintings but rather how the paintings were viewed by their contemporaries and what they said about the society that produced them, though this becomes clearest in her conclusion. By examining an admirable range of sources from popular broadsides and prints to

high art paintings and sculptures, her intention is to reveal certain wider processes, consisting of "all-embracing American Indian types and typologies" that, she argues, "displace the lived experience of American Indian culture and substitute for it a simulacrum that better accorded with European expectations," something that she insists should be borne in mind when such images are used in conjunction with present-day written accounts (pp. 5, 9).

American Indians consists of five well-written chapters, each one of which meets a clearly stated purpose, outlined in the introduction, and contributes an interlocking piece to a much bigger picture, summed up nicely in a very concise conclusion. The reader is drawn through the chapters in a chronological progression of themes and though the overlap in years between some chapters can cause limited confusion, this particular methodology is for the most part effective. The book's effectiveness is heightened by the author's continued repetition of key terms and themes, keeping the focus tight and the progression fluid. Perhaps the best example of this is the way the typological presentation of American Indians in chapter 5 is likened to the older allegorical presentation described at length in chapter 1: "The whiskey bottle and cow's skull stand for Indian degradation just as the allegory's exotic accoutrements and severed head had formerly stood for wealth and violence" (p. 148); thus, she brings the reader full circle. Such an achievement could lend itself to the criticism that British perceptions of Native Americans within the chosen 140 year span is too clear-cut, or too perfect. Pratt saves herself from this criticism through an analysis of examples of artwork that deviated from the "norm," as if to subtly remind the reader that in her attempt to uncover certain "all-embracing types and typologies," she realizes that a greater complexity lies beneath the surface. The emphasis she places on John Flaxman's monument, detailing a fair-skinned ranger and a Mohawk warrior standing on either side of a bust of Governor Sim-

coe in chapter 4, represents a good example of this. "At a time when most contemporary representations of Indians showed them as victims of the inevitable progress of European settlement ... Flaxman's monument recalls the last moment when British and American Indian interests made common cause" (p. 104).

Pratt also adds depth to her work through the variety of sources she examines. Keeping in mind that she is approaching her topic from a synoptic view, she takes examples from across the social strata, from political prints to "high art" paintings, as well as from a range of physical art forms including sculptures and architecture, and this has the potential to serve her purpose well. According to the author, "this book is not intended to even begin providing comprehensive coverage of British images of American Indians in this period. Rather than adduce a wealth of examples, my intention has been to work with images I consider to be definitive of the wider processes I wish to expose" (p. 9). Her discussion of these sources are, in addition, well supported by the numerous illustrations included within the text and the color plates in the middle of the book allow the reader to apply Pratt's arguments and evaluate them for him/herself. However, the analysis of these sources could be viewed as slightly unbalanced as her exuberant start tends to trail off into an examination of mainly paintings in the second half of the book. She is also careful to draw attention to the different classes of people who would have viewed images of Native Americans and tries to take into account possible perceptions of people from outside of London as well. Yet she merely draws attention to these factors in chapter 2 and does not discuss them again, which puts her intended synoptic overview in danger of becoming too general.

This is not to say that Pratt's discussions of the artwork she chooses to analyze are not well thought out; on the contrary, they are extremely clear and are made accessible to even those who

may not have a background in the visual arts. In fact, in making such a valiant attempt to provide all the explanatory background and context, she can, at times, provide an excessive amount of material. In chapter 2, for example, she spends the first six pages giving background information on the rise of the British empire and the visit of the Four Indian Kings to London in 1710, before finally launching into a brief description of the portraits of the kings produced while they were there. As a portion of her overall argument rests on the fact that British images of Native Americans in the eighteenth century were influenced, in part, by actual interactions between the two cultures, a case could be made for the necessity of such contextual information. However, part of setting the context includes lengthy references to contemporary literary works and Pratt seems to walk the line, rather dangerously, between providing the proper background information and putting too much focus on it. In the last chapter she just barely saves herself from her lengthy and detailed discussion of Thomas Campbell's poem "Gertrude of Wyoming," through a subsequent analysis of two visually artistic responses to it.

In spite of extensive historical description, in some parts, or seemingly intense focus on contemporary literary works, in others, the book is very well written and enjoyable to read. The links between chapters, repetition of key themes, and the general organization of the book ensure that the information is presented in a very clear and comprehensive way. Does it contribute to the range of literature on the "others" of the early British empire? The answer is, in many ways, yes. Stephanie Pratt examines, for the first time, an era where images of the Native American in visual art were changing and new tensions were being created, paralleling actual historical occurrences overseas. These images have much to say about the society that was producing them and Pratt has made a bold attempt to examine British perceptions from this viewpoint. However, her conclusion, when related back to certain state-

ments made in her introduction, does not ring completely true. In her introduction she gives the impression that, due to historical circumstances, older ways of viewing the Native American (i.e., through allegory or the popular concept of the noble savage) were challenged, indirectly implying that previous historians who have focused only on the Native American as a noble savage, for example, need to perhaps rethink their position. Yet, she concludes that, while the British concept of the Native American may have changed during the middle part of the eighteenth century, "that change in understanding was never capable of overshadowing the framework of Eurocentric understandings that positioned the Indian within a context of expectations" (p. 150). As previously mentioned, the allegories of 1700 described in chapter 1, return in 1840, in another form, and are discussed in chapter 5 under the trope of the dying Indian. After all this talk about change and British perceptions of America's indigenous peoples being more complex than previously thought, the reader is left with a conclusion that states, "the repertoire the Indian was called upon to play may have been elaborated, especially in the middle decades of the 18th century, but his or her fundamental persona remained remarkably constant" (p. 150).

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