

Mediating Narrative: Oscar Howe's Subversive Prints in *North American Indian Costumes* (1952)

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Between 1929 and 1952, art educator Oscar Brousse Jacobson spearheaded the publication of six volumes in a series devoted to the arts and cultures of Native North American tribes. Published by C. Szwedzicki in Nice, France, Jacobson authored three of the six portfolios—*Kiowa Indian Art* (1929), *American Indian Painters* (1950), and *North American Indian Costumes* (1952).¹ Jacobson was astutely aware of the market for Native arts, especially in light of his relationship with the Kiowa Six, a group of student artists who enrolled at the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1926, including Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, Jack Hokeah, Stephen Mopope, Monroe Tsatoke, and later, Lois Smoky.² Beginning in the 1920s, a rise in the commercial popularity of Native American art, especially Kiowa and Pueblo watercolors, occurred in the United States. Non-Native art educators at key institutions, such as Dorothy Dunn at the Santa Fe Indian School and Jacobson at the University of Oklahoma, encouraged their Native students to create works that were “authentically” Indian, and thus devoid of Euro-American influence. The effects of the commercialization of Native arts is evidenced in the portfolios produced by Jacobson and Szwedzicki.

Scholars have produced little research on the Szwedzicki portfolios, often only referring to the prints in regards to scholarship on specific Native artists or cultural traditions.³ To date, Janet Berlo has authored the only work on the portfolios themselves, which she wrote to accompany the University of Cincinnati's digitization of the entire series. Berlo situates the series amidst the cultural history of Native artists in the twentieth century, and she contends that the Szwedzicki portfolios are unique in their assertion of Native artistic agency. Berlo argues that each of the Native artists involved in this project “were motivated by an auto-ethnographic impulse,” which led them “to depict and describe the unique features of their culture that some feared were in danger of disappearing.”⁴ Building on Berlo's work, I argue that the Native artists who contributed to the Szwedzicki portfolios not only strove to preserve their rapidly changing cultures, but also that their work reexamines and redefines the representation of Native Americans within the discourse of modern American society.

The Szwedzicki portfolios provided an important opportunity for Native artists to repurpose Euro-American imagery and to re-contextualize the depiction of Native life using photomechanical reproductions, which accompanied narrative text. This re-contextualization is most readily apparent in the two volumes titled *North American Indian Costumes*, in which Yanktonai Dakota artist Oscar Howe borrowed imagery from the works of Anglo artists such as Karl Bodmer and George Catlin to revise the representation of American Indian dress. Howe's images constitute a palimpsest, as he partially erased the original purposes and contexts in which his source imagery was produced, and layered over them for his own interpretation of Native American cultures. By removing the original imagery from the realm of Euro-American fine arts and reusing it as a Native expression of indigenous cultures, Howe effectively layered over obvious traces of non-Native artistry.⁵ It is important to note that the original price of the *Indian Costumes* volume was \$80, quite a hefty cost for the average American consumer in 1952.⁶ Jacobson likely marketed each of

the Szwedzicki portfolios to an affluent, well-educated, Euro-American audience, which probably would have been familiar with the Anglo artists whose work Howe repurposed.⁷

The *Indian Costumes* set is divided into two separate volumes, which are organized chronologically, beginning with a depiction of a Timucua male from 1564, and ending with a “Young Indian” from 1950. In the accompanying text, Jacobson outlined the scope of the volumes, explaining that in the centuries since the first European contact, Native groups have “copied and simulated European dress,” up to the point of adopting Western clothing entirely, as seen in the *Young Indian*, 1950 print.⁸ While Jacobson’s narrative suggests an attempt at objective, ethnographical description, each of the 50 prints—25 in each volume—provides the viewer with a more intimate and expressive view of the particular tribe depicted. Berlo notes that “Jacobson and Howe did not seek to convey Native dress in a timeless, ahistorical manner, but rather to illuminate the many changes in native garments during 400 years.”⁹ However, Berlo does not address the complexities presented by the volumes’ images, aside from stating that a number of Howe’s prints referred to specific, well-known artworks by non-Native artists. Though Jacobson did not acknowledge it in his text, Howe repurposed recognizably Euro-American portraits of Native individuals as the bases for his paintings. At first glance, Howe appears to present his subjects in a relatively objective manner. However, by reading his images and carefully comparing them to their source material, Howe’s quiet subversion becomes readily apparent.

While *Pocahontas in English Court Dress, 1616* is only the fourth plate in the volume, Howe’s print shows the already marked influence of European colonization in the Americas. In light of Jacobson’s introductory text, the reader would expect to see a gradual progression over the sequence of the fifty plates, with Euro-American fashions incrementally subsuming the various traditional attires. By including such an unexpected image and corresponding description at the beginning of the volume, Jacobson and Howe disrupted the anticipated narrative flow, and forced their audience to reconsider the timeline of colonial history. This presents a striking contrast to the previous plate, in which the posterior view of a Powhatan man depicts an anonymous subject displaying a traditional feathered shawl and tattooed calves.

Based on a 1616 engraving by Simon van de Passe, Howe’s representation of Matoaka—the Powhatan name of the figure recognized as Pocahontas—gives no indication of her Powhatan heritage. Her conservative dress covers the majority of her skin, not only to conform to British fashion of the time of the original engraving, but also to cover the traditional tattoos worn by many Algonquin women. While she visited the court of King James I in 1616, Van de Passe engraved the only known portrait of Matoaka made during her lifetime. The engraving was widely reproduced throughout Europe, and inspired other Euro-American artists in their posthumous depictions of her. Richard Norris Brooke’s 1905 painting most closely corresponds to Howe’s print, as Brooke used van de Passe’s engraving to envisage a full-length portrait of Matoaka. Retaining the ostrich feathered fan, Elizabethan lace ruff, and plumed top hat, Brooke included a full view of Matoaka’s dress, while depicting her with porcelain-white skin and prototypically Anglo feminine features.

Howe, in comparison, returned some phenotypically Native features to his subject, such as darker skin and pronounced cheekbones, but further emphasized the disparate visual elements of an indigenous individual in colonial dress. By inverting Brooke’s color scheme and depicting Matoaka’s dress as purple, rather than red, Howe erased any connotations of red associated with Native people. The sumptuous purple fabric in Howe’s

print might allude to the designation of Matoaka as an “Indian princess”, yet the artist did not fully engage this stereotype, as he chose to show her in British dress, rather than traditional Powhatan attire.¹⁰ Howe’s depiction represents the legend or normalized conception of Pocahontas, rather than the historic individual Matoaka. He recognized that her life had become a story repeatedly distorted through centuries of colonialism.

It is important to note that the image of Matoaka is one of only three prints out of fifty which provide a specific name for the subject.¹¹ It is unclear whether it was Jacobson’s or Howe’s idea to include these specific references, though it is likely that Jacobson made these choices as the author of the volumes. What is clear, however, is that Howe intentionally used recognizable portraits of noted Native individuals, even for the anonymous prints. For example, plate 11, *Cherokee, 1790*, depicts Sequoyah, another canonical figure of Native history, but one not named in the print’s caption and mentioned only fleetingly in Jacobson’s text. In his description of the Cherokee Nation, Jacobson did not address the attire—traditional or otherwise—of the tribe. Instead, he briefly outlined the socioeconomic history of the Cherokee from first contact until 1906, when, he claimed, “the Cherokee Nation came to an end.”¹²

Howe repurposed Charles Bird King’s portrait of the Cherokee scholar Sequoyah, which King painted during Sequoyah’s trip to Washington DC in 1828, and later published in McKenney & Hall’s *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* (3 volumes, 1836-1844). In King’s rendition, Sequoyah points to the culmination of his decade-long project of constructing a written Cherokee alphabet. With a thin-stemmed pipe in his mouth and a silver peace medal around his neck, Sequoyah gazes knowingly at the viewer, as if inviting them to admire the bridge he has created between the traditions of written and oral language. Howe excised the pipe, medal, and syllabary, portraying Sequoyah instead as an unidentified Cherokee citizen. Although the artist depicted the figure in full-length and gave him a tanned leather pack in lieu of the alphabetic tablet, Howe asserted Sequoyah’s identity by preserving King’s blue-striped dress jacket and red turban. In effect, Howe removed the identifying aspects of King’s original portrait, especially Sequoyah’s name printed below his visage, as it was published in *History of the Indian Tribes*.¹³ While Jacobson often referred to the various tribes in the past tense, and frequently noted the dates that he considered to be the end or extinction of each group, Howe’s use of specific, identifiable figures remind the viewer of these cultures’ continuing existence. This is especially pertinent in the Cherokee print, as Sequoyah’s work as a linguist and his significance as an historical figure continue to shape the Cherokee Nation, in spite of Jacobson’s claim that the Cherokee Nation itself “came to an end” in 1906.

For the plate titled *Mandan, 1832*, Howe reinterpreted Karl Bodmer’s illustration of Sih-Chida and Mahchsi-Karehde, which originally appeared in the published journals of Prince Maximilian of Wied’s travels across North America. In comparison to the source material for the Matoaka and Sequoyah portraits, Bodmer’s print is unique in its inclusion of background imagery, although it is somewhat minimal. Rather than select only one of Bodmer’s figures to represent the traditional dress of the Mandan tribe, Howe combined the portraits of Sih-Chida (Yellow Feather) and Mahchsi-Karehde (Flying War Eagle). He seems to have placed the head and robe of Yellow Feather on the body of Flying War Eagle, while erasing the former’s red-ribbons in favor of the latter’s fur-adorned moccasins. In merging the figures from the original image, Howe essentially erased Bodmer’s identification of the Mandan pair. Prince Maximilian, a German amateur explorer who hired Bodmer to illustrate

his travels in North America, referred to Yellow Feather and Flying War Eagle multiple times in his published journals, and noted that Bodmer developed a close friendship with both Mandan men. Bodmer's work captivated Yellow Feather in particular, and the two worked on several projects together, including various self-portraits of Yellow Feather in Chief Matotope's (Four Bears) regalia.¹⁴ According to Maximilian's journals, Bodmer encouraged Yellow Feather to borrow attire and accoutrements from other Native individuals who sat for a portrait, thus resulting in a variety of self-portraits in which Yellow Feather constructed his own identity, even though it did not reflect his actual position in Mandan society.

In a similar gesture, Howe erased the specific identity of both Yellow Feather and Flying War Eagle by combining and constructing the two figures into one single, anonymous Mandan subject. While these two individuals are not as recognizable as Sequoyah, Howe's use of Bodmer's illustration, which has been widely distributed as Maximilian's journals continue to be reproduced, invokes a well-known style and subject matter to re-picture Mandan culture and dress. Similar to his treatment of King's Sequoyah portrait, Howe repurposed Bodmer's ethnographical print to decontextualize it from its original purpose as an illustration of the romanticized adventures of Prince Maximilian. Reinforcing the rhetoric that Maximilian used in his journals, Jacobson attributed the fine details of Mandan attire to vanity, stating that the men "paid greatest attention to their dress, especially the head dress."¹⁵ This comment provides a unique parallel to Yellow Feather and his self-portraits, in which he constructed an identity that was not realistic by representing himself in Chief Four Bears' regalia, denoting social stature that was higher than his own. Howe further echoed the concept of erasing an original identity and constructing a new one, which is evident in his use of distinct elements from both Yellow Feather's and Flying War Eagle's portraits.

One of the most, if not *the* most complex image, in Howe's work for the *Indian Costumes* series is plate 37, *Oglala Sioux Chief (Formal)*, 1885. In his text, Jacobson claims that Howe's illustration is based on a photograph of Chief American Horse by Frank Rinehart, but the idea of this photograph as source material seems incongruent with Howe's imagery. In 1898, Rinehart photographed the Indian Congress in Omaha, where he took several pictures of the Oglala leader American Horse. In most of Rinehart's photographs, American Horse faces the viewer, wearing an eagle-feathered war bonnet, while holding a beaded tobacco bag and a peace pipe. Howe's image, on the other hand, shows the anonymous leader with similar, though not identical regalia, and holding a coup stick instead of a peace pipe. While trying to find alternative photographs of American Horse that Howe might have used for inspiration, I discovered an Edward S. Curtis photograph of Chief High Hawk, a Brulé Lakota spiritual leader, which I contend is more likely the actual source material for Howe's *Oglala Sioux Chief* print.¹⁶ The stances of Howe's chief and High Hawk are identical, just mirrored. Furthermore, both figures hold a beaded tobacco bag adorned with four circles in each corner, they both wear war bonnets displaying fringed tips, and their leggings are identically patterned with beaded cross designs (symbolizing the four directions) and tipi motifs. Most tellingly, both figures hold a coup stick, often referred to as a war club, with the braid of a defeated soldier affixed to the end. In keeping with the pseudo-ethnographical style of the volumes' prints, Howe removes High Hawk from Curtis' placement amidst the rolling hills, but adds detail that the original photograph could not capture. The monotone photogravure process does not reproduce the scintillatingly bright colors that adorn High Hawk's regalia.

It is noteworthy that Jacobson cites the photograph of American Horse as the source image, and yet the title of Howe's print is simply *Oglala Sioux Chief (Formal)*, 1885. American Horse was nationally recognized for his fervent opposition to Crazy Horse's involvement in the Great Sioux War, as well as for condemning the rising popularity of the Ghost Dance in the late 19th century. High Hawk, on the other hand, epitomized the dangerous rebellion that American Horse so vehemently condemned. Is it possible that Howe intentionally included the imagery from Curtis' photograph, rather than Rinehart's, without informing Jacobson? American Horse was a more recognizable, amicable figure in the American mindset, while High Hawk was less well-known, and for members of the dominant society who were aware of him at the time of the portfolio's publication, he was regarded as a radical trouble-maker who defied American Horse's wishes for peaceful relations between the Oglala people and the federal government. If we take Howe's invocation of the High Hawk portrait to be an intentional subversion of Jacobson's narrative, then this is the most pertinent example of palimpsest in the *Indian Costumes* publications. Not only does Howe erase nearly every quality from the Rinehart photograph of American Horse, but he further complicates the image by inscribing High Hawk's photograph into his own print.

The four prints examined here reveal the manner in which Howe presented a history *sub rosa*, one left out of Jacobson's text. Although Howe's reuse of well-known portraits may not fit the traditional definition of palimpsest, his decision to reconstruct Native identity through artistic manipulation suggest erasure, revision, and reinterpretation. While Howe drew upon the history and visual components of the artworks of Brooke, King, Bodmer, and Curtis, he layered over the original images while still allowing traces of the original artistry to show through. Ultimately, Howe equated the Indian figure, which has been subject to generations of assimilation, acculturation, and colonization, with a canvas that the dominant society has attempted to erase and re-inscribe, although the traces of indigeneity continue to show through in various ways. Howe fashioned various visual disruptions from a Native perspective by using non-Native imagery to accompany Jacobson's vignettes. Each print directly corresponds to one of the author's descriptive texts, although in several cases, Howe purposefully included visual references that complicate the project's narrative. The artist drew upon ethnological and art historical research to inform his *Indian Costume* imagery, but these sources did not simply serve as inspiration. Instead, Howe adopted the original images, sometimes almost identically, in order to question the concept of "authentic Indianness," whether that quality refers to art, dress, or other aspects of tribal culture.

Selected Sources

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The University of Cincinnati has digitized all six of the C. Szwedzicki North American Indian Works portfolios through their library. All text, images, and supplemental information for the portfolios can be found at <https://digital.libraries.uc.edu/szwedzicki/>.

¹ The other portfolios in the series are *Pueblo Indian Painting* (1932), with an introduction by Hartley Burr Alexander; *Pueblo Indian Pottery* (two volumes, 1933 and 1936) illustrated and authored by Kenneth M. Chapman; and *Sioux Indian Painting* (1938), also authored by Alexander.

² These five male artists are known as the Kiowa Five, but many scholars, myself included, choose to acknowledge a sixth member, Lois Smoky. Smoky joined the original five in 1927, and because her artistic career was less prolific than her peers, historians have often overlooked her participation in the group.

³ See Isabel Campbell, "With Southwestern Artists: All Indians Have Six Fingers," *Southwest Review* 14 (1928); Harold E. Driver and William C. Massey, "Comparative Studies of North American Indians," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 47, No. 2 (1957); Jessica Horton, "A Cloudburst in Venice," *American Art* Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring 2015); Weston La Barre, "Twenty Years of Peyote Studies," *Current Anthropology* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1960); Stanley Vestal, "The Indians of Oklahoma," *Southwest Review* Vol. 14, No. 2 (1928).

⁴ Janet C. Berlo, *The Szwedzicki Portfolios: Native American Fine Art and American Visual Culture, 1917-1952* (University of Cincinnati Libraries Digital Collections, 2008), 7.

⁵ For more examples of palimpsest in Native American ledger art, see George Flett, *George Flett: Ledger Art* (Spokane, WA: New Media Ventures, 2007); Janet Catherine Berlo, *Spirit Beings and Sun Dancers: Black Hawk's Vision of the Lakota World* (New York: George Braziller, 2000); and Herman J. Viola, *Warrior Artists: Historic Cheyenne and Kiowa Ledger Art Drawn by Making Medicine and Zotom* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1998).

⁶ Berlo, *Szwedzicki Portfolios*, 81.

⁷ At this time, it is unclear whether Jacobson himself did the marketing for the Szwedzicki portfolios, or if the publisher took on that responsibility. For the purposes of this paper, I state that Jacobson marketed, planned, and coordinated the production and sales of each portfolio, since he spearheaded and coordinated the project. See the Oscar Brousse Jacobson Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

⁸ Oscar B. Jacobson, "Young Indian, 1950," *North American Indian Costumes, Vol. II* (Nice, France: Editions d'Art, C. Szwedzicki, 1952), 11.

⁹ Berlo, *Szwedzicki Portfolios*, 86.

¹⁰ For further reading on the trope of the "Indian Princess," see Rayna Green, "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture," *The Massachusetts Review* Vol. 16, No. 4 (Autumn 1975); and Nancy Marie Mithlo, *Our Indian Princess: Subverting the Stereotype* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2008).

¹¹ The other two are plates 34 and 43, depicting Quanah Parker and Monroe Tsatoke, respectively.

¹² Jacobson, "Cherokee, 1790," *Indian Costumes Vol. I*, 14.

¹³ Thomas McKenney and James Hall, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America, Vols. I and II* (Philadelphia: D. Rice and Co., 1872).

¹⁴ Stephen S. Witte, Ed., *The North American Journals of Prince Maximilian of Wied, Vols. I-III* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 110.

¹⁵ Jacobson, "Mandan, 1832," *Indian Costumes Vol. I*, 16.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Rinehart's assistant at the Indian Congress, Adolph Muhr, would become Curtis' studio manager less than a decade later. William N. Goetzmann, "The Arcadian Landscapes of Edward Curtis," *Perpetual Mirage: Photographic Narratives of the Desert West* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996).