

secac art INQUIRIES

Vol. XVII, No. 1, 2016

The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York, New York

March 3–May 10, 2015

Mary D. Edwards
Pratt Institute

***The Plains Indians:
Artists of Earth and Sky***

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York, New York

March 3–May 10, 2015

The comprehensive exhibition entitled *The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky* originated at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris and travelled to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City before reaching New York. It was curated by Gaylord Torrence, the Fred and Virginia Merrill Senior Curator of American Indian Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum, and guest curated by Stéphane Martin, president of the Musée du quai Branly, who first proposed the project in 2010. Lent by both private collectors and museums in Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States, the 133 objects in all media on display dated from prehistoric times to the early twenty-first century. Accompanying the exhibit was a 317-page catalogue, edited by Torrence, with essays by Arthur Amiotte and Colin G. Calloway, containing an index, a rich bibliography, and color photographs of each item in the show.¹

Upon entering the galleries one was greeted by two prehistoric carvings familiar to and beloved by anyone who admires the art and artifacts made by indigenous peoples of North America. The first was the Adena (possibly Hopewell) tubular pipe in the form of a male in a perfectly symmetrical pose standing with arms at the sides and legs bent at the knee (Fig. 1). With head too large and legs too short he gazes directly ahead,



suggesting the ritual pose of a dancer or the mystical stance of a deified forebear. The front of his loincloth is incised with a biomorphic motif suggesting either a decoration in the form of a serpent or an X-ray view of his intestines. Behind him he sports a bustle of turkey feathers, causing Richard Townsend to suggest in his catalogue entry that it is the precursor of the bustles worn today by fancy dancers who perform at pow-wows.² The second ancient figure was the bauxite portrayal of the Hero Redhorn or Morningstar, seated cross-legged and lost in thought (Fig. 2). He wears a copper crown, a shell necklace, and a cape covered with feathers or ermine pelts. As languid as the earlier figure is stiff, he also functioned as a pipe; thus both carvings reminded viewers at the outset of the sacred nature of smoking among indigenous peoples.

Musée du quai Branly lent three exceptionally important robes most

Top left, Human Effigy Pipe, 100 B.C.-A.D. 100, Adena or Hopewell. Pipestone, height: 7 7/8 in. (20 cm), width: 2 5/8 in. × 2 in. (6.6 × 5.1 cm). (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection (A1200/10)).

Bottom left, The Hero Redhorn or Morningstar, 1100-1200, Mississippian. Bauxite, height: 8 7/8 in. (22.5 cm). The University of Arkansas, Fayetteville Museum Collections (47-2-1). (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the University of Arkansas Museum Collections.)

Top right, Robe with Mythic Bird, 1700-1740, Eastern Plains. Native-tanned leather & pigment, length: 42 3/8 in. (107.6 cm), width: 47 7/8 in. (121.6 cm). Musée du quai Branly, Paris (71.1878.32.134). (Photo Credit: Thierry Olivier/Michel Urtado. Musée du Quai Branly © musée du quai Branly, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY)



Gunstock Club, ca. 1800, Pawnee. Cherry Wood & pigment, length: 27 1/4 in. (69.2 cm), width: 4 1/2 in. (11.4 cm). Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Diker. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Collection of Charles and Valerie Diker)



Buffalo Picture Tipi of Never Got Shot, 1891-1904, Kiowa. Native-tanned leather & pigment, width: 52 in. (132.1 cm). National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Department of Anthropology. (Photo credit: Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution (E229905-0))

likely from the early eighteenth century. The oldest was probably acquired at a French trading post on the Mississippi River (Fig. 3). Was it a robe belonging to an individual who traded it for staples or was it manufactured specifically for the purpose of trade? Or did a French person commission it? Painted in yellow, black, and russet, the robe displays a schematic thunderbird composed of needle-like triangles. Stylistically it is untainted by European pictorial conventions. Nonetheless a discrepancy occurs within the design: the bird's head turns to its left whereas according to Native American tradition of the plains it should face to its right. The inconsistency gives weight to the argument that the robe was made for trade or on commission. By intentionally introducing a "mistake," the artist could prevent the image of the mythic avian from being harmed upon entering the alien Caucasian culture.

A war club made by a Pawnee Indian from cherry wood in about 1800 reveals the focus on the heavens central to the people of his tribe (Figs. 4-a and 4-b). Chipped into one side are thirty-seven four-pointed stars, some clustered to suggest constellations. On the opposite surface is incised a circle which trails a long zig-zagging tail to reference a comet. The carver may have selected the cherry tree as the source of material for the club since its wood "contains a poison," thereby empowering the warrior who carried it into battle. Non-native scholars used to categorize this type of weapon as a "gunstock club," an allusion to European weaponry. In his catalogue entry, Evan M. Maurer suggests a more appropriate term, - "Deer Leg" club - that resonates with the Pawnee world.³

Among the people of the Plains, ownership of the design for a tipi cover is hereditary. But by 1892, all but one

design existed only in the minds of their owners, due to the requirement to live on a reservation in non-native housing and the inability to obtain buffalo hides because the herds were near extinction. Between 1891 and 1904, Smithsonian ethnographer James Mooney convinced the owners of ninety designs to let artists record them on paper. Half of these were then recreated on miniature tipi covers. On display in the exhibit was the design originally created by Never Got Shot, a Kiowa man (Fig. 5). It portrays a parade of seven mature bison and one calf broken into groups of four by an elegantly antlered elk. Before the elk floats a ceremonial pipe with a red stone bowl such as would enable a tribal member to petition the spirit world when smoked. The elk and two bison are shown with spirit lines leading to their hearts designating them as inhabitants of a supernatural realm.

In 1889-90 Wovoka, the Paiute prophet, inspired a new ritual—the Ghost Dance. The peoples of the Plains believed that if they performed this circular dance in ceremonial garb, they could bring back the buffalo herds and cause the European colonists to disappear. Included in the exhibit was a Ghost Dance dress made by an Arapaho artist using native tanned hide. It is stained red, a sacred color also painted on the faces of those who took part in the ritual, and adorned with Ghost Dance imagery: the magpie (a spiritual messenger), the crow (believed to be omniscient), and the ceremonial pipementioned above. Present also is a turtle, a symbol of the earth among the Arapaho, as well as a bison and two cedar trees. Representing the heavens are a rainbow, the sun, the moon, and numerous stars. Thus, the images of earth and sky combine to express the hope of cosmic renewal that the participants believed the Ghost Dance would bring them.

The exhibit closed with contemporary works by Native Americans. Among them was Arthur Amiotte's *Wounded Knee #III* (2001), a mixed-media collage on canvas portraying Custer's Last Stand, the Ghost Dance, Christian churches, the Massacre at Wounded Knee itself, and a view of the grassy site of that event now cordoned off by a barbed-wire fence. Arranged in strata, the photomontage images remind us all of the abuse inflicted on the people of the Plains in the nineteenth century—a wound in American history still very much in need of repair.

Mary D. Edwards
Pratt Institute

Endnotes

1. Gaylord Torrence, ed., *The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky* (Paris: Musée du quai Branly, Éditions Skira; New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2014).
2. *Ibid.*, 50.
3. *Ibid.*, 84.

Francis Alÿs: A Story of Negotiation

MALBA: Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires |
Buenos Aires, Argentina | **November 6, 2015–February 15, 2016**

A man scans the arid landscape south of Mexico City, watching for one of the frequent tornadoes that spin through the area—and, when he sees one, runs towards it plunging into its center. A file of children wades into the water off the coast of Gibraltar, fighting the surf and then releasing small boats made of sandals into the treacherous strait. A boy careens through the streets of war-torn Kabul, unspooling a reel of film as a second child follows, gamely trying to collect the unwound ribbon. Over the past ten years, the Belgium-born, Mexico-based artist Francis Alÿs has developed a body of work that is at once poetic and unnerving, while always remaining

in contact with the world at large. The video pieces for which he is best known regularly feature an allusively mythological dimension, but they also point to the dire consequences of water mismanagement and climate change, of regional warfare and the status of immigrants in a neoliberal economic landscape.

An intriguing ongoing exhibition of Alÿs' work offers a chance to consider these themes at length, while also allowing us to view his practice in several new ways. To be sure, *Francis Alÿs: A Story of Negotiation* (which opened at Buenos Aires' MALBA in late 2015, before traveling to Havana, Toronto, and Los Angeles) is not at heart a revisionist show. Curated



Francis Alÿs, still from *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*, 2008. Photographic documentation of an action, Strait of Gibraltar. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the artist and MALBA)