



Arts of Diplomacy: Lewis and Clark's Indian Collection

Castle McLaughlin

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When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led the Corps of Discovery on their epic journey across the American West, they were acting not only as territorial explorers, but as diplomatic emissaries from the young United States to the Native American peoples they encountered. Castle McLaughlin's fresh examination of the Native American objects related to Lewis and Clark's expedition brilliantly challenges the conventional wisdom about these men and their mission as scientists, collectors, and explorers and places their journey in the context of a complex process of mutual discovery between representatives of very different cultures. In "Arts of Diplomacy", Native Americans are revealed as active participants in the outcome of the expedition, selecting objects of significance to bestow as gifts or use in trade, and skillfully negotiating their own strategic interests in their dealings with the exploring party. McLaughlin makes it clear that Lewis and Clark were not acting as "collectors" of exotic material culture, but rather were dealing on a much more even playing field with cultural representatives whose goodwill - and goods - were critical to the success of their enterprise. The vehicle for this innovative and illuminating analysis is the collection of late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Native American objects from the Prairie, Plains, and Pacific Northwest at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. The magnificent objects in the Peabody Museum's collection, presented in lavish color photography, are analyzed in detail and traced through documentation to their probable sources - both tribal makers and users and likely collectors. Long thought to be the only remaining ethnographic items collected by Lewis and Clark, the objects are here exposed to intense scrutiny by a team of anthropologists, art historians, and material culture specialists. McLaughlin's interpretation is a model for how, through informed contextual analysis, objects can be used to tell stories. Her text gives voice to the calumets, buffalo robes, and basketry pieces that served as items of gifting and exchange in cross-cultural encounters. Contemporary Native American voices are heard here as well, in essays by and about Wasco fiber artist Pat Courtney Gold, Mandan-Hidatsa flute player Keith Bear, Hunkpapa Lakota painter Butch Thunder Hawk, Lakota quillwork artist Jo Esther Parshall, Mandan-Hidatsa community activist Mike Cross, and others. Far from being participants in a "First Encounter," as the Lewis and Clark expedition is so often portrayed, the objects tell a story of Native peoples already deeply engaged in a far-reaching exchange of goods and materials - sophisticated traders and cultural brokers with networks of exchange that spanned the globe from eastern Europe to the South Pacific decades before the arrival of Lewis and Clark. As historian James P. Ronda writes in his Foreword, "Built on the best historical and anthropological sources, and informed by current critical theory, Arts of Diplomacy gives voice to seemingly mute objects and lets readers hear Native voices in the expedition conversation." Castle McLaughlin is a social anthropologist who writes frequently on the American West, past and present, and Native American art and visual culture. She is associate curator of Native American ethnography at the Peabody Museum.

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