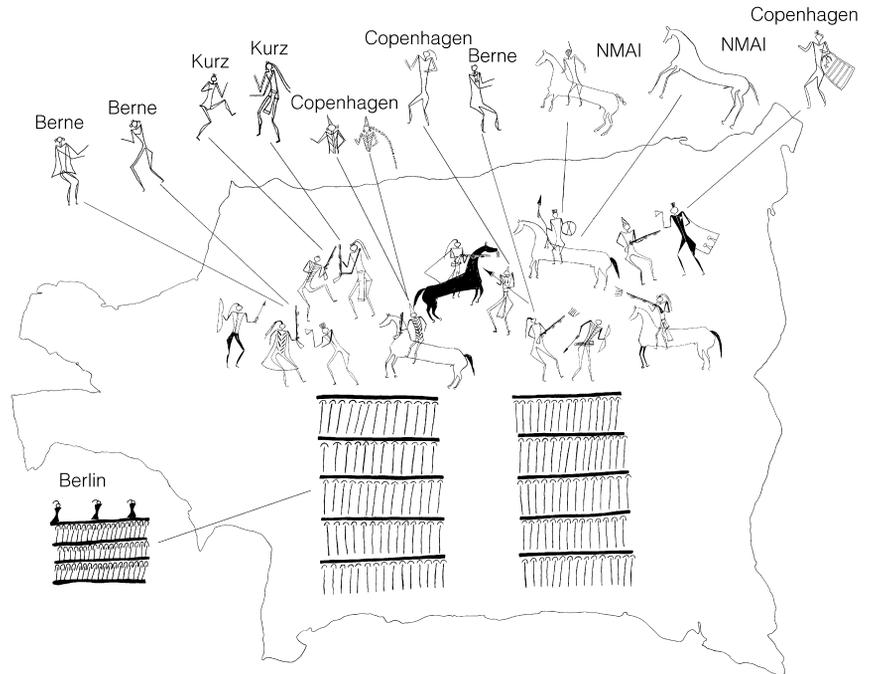




NATIVE ARTS

Anatomy of a Fake

Around 1989 a Seattle dealer commissioned a well-known replicator of Indian artifacts to paint an imitation war-exploit robe. Some months later the dealer sold the painted robe to a New York collector for \$65,000.00. The painting quickly came to the attention of leading scholars and they mistook it for a genuine and important artifact. I was then researching hide paintings executed in the style of the robe, and so traveled to New York to study it. The robe became the seventh work examined in my essay "Seven War-Exploit Paintings: A Search for their Origins," published in *Studies in American Indian Art: A Memorial Tribute to Norman Feder* (Brownstone 2001), where it was identified as the "Fisher robe," after the name of the owner at the time of study. Soon after publication I received a call from a well-known New York dealer who explained that he had recently bought the robe from its first owner and, after reading my essay, he wanted me to write an article on his new acquisition. Not a month later the replicator also read my essay and was much surprised to find his spurious painting prominently illustrated and discussed. He immediately let a scholar/friend know that his painting had been misrepresented in my article. His friend passed along the news to the unfortunate new owner of the robe. Additional calls were made to ameliorate what had become an awkward, not to mention costly, situation among friends and acquaintances. A lawyer/collector advised that the replicator should write a letter to the initial collector and admit to painting the robe. Once the collector received the letter she had "guilty knowledge" of the robe, allowing the second collector to demand a refund. She paid and then, retracing the "chain of custody," managed to get her money back from the dealer who initially



The fake "Fisher robe": The lines leading from figures on the fake robe lead to their authentic counterparts, all identified and discussed in Brownstone (2001). All elements of the illustration are drawn true to scale. Drawing by the author.

commissioned the replication.¹ While the former owners have been compensated, there still remains a need to correct the false information on the robe which has now become a part of the literature.

The replicator and I must have been looking closely at some of the same paintings and at the same time, but for different reasons. I believe his false painting is based on four or five authentic paintings, all discussed in my paper. Three are painted robes held by the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, National Museum of Denmark, and National Museum of the American Indian. A shirt from the latter institution was possibly involved. He also utilized one or two Rudolph Kurz draw-

ings held by the Bernisches Historisches Museum. The overall composition of the replica, with the upper register devoted to the narration of exploits and the lower to a tally, appears to be modeled after the Berne robe. The tally is comprised of rows of pin-and-cup motifs which partially replicate the "honor chart" on the Hidatsa robe in the Berlin museum. Some say, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that this motif represents sexual "conquests," suggesting an element of humor in the *ersatz* robe. The accompanying illustration shows the striking resemblance between figures on the replica and their counterparts on the authentic paintings. At the same time changes in details on figures in the replica, such as weapons and hair styles, mask their true identities. (In my illustration I erased weapons held by authentic figures above the replica for purposes of comparison.) In the same vein, spatial rela-

¹ To substantiate the claim that the painting was fraudulent, the first owner had the pigments chemically analyzed. The two colors employed, black and orange/vermillion, proved to be acrylic paint.

tions between figures were altered in their transposition from original to replica. The exception is the scene featuring the high-stepping man with a gun facing another similarly armed warrior which almost exactly replicates its counterpart on Kurz's original drawing. Before it was revealed as a fake, Bill Holm noted this extraordinary likeness (Holm, personal communication to Cowdrey, February 1996). I postulated that Kurz must have partially used the robe in question as his model for his drawings (Brownstone to Holm, personal communication, July 1996), but the reverse now appears to be true. This deception largely owes its success to the copying and altering of elements from diverse but stylistically equivalent originals. Adding to this is the fact that the painting is executed on an old unpainted buffalo robe, said to have been acquired on an Indian reservation before becoming part of the replicator's stock.

In recent years it has been almost impossible to acquire true brain-tanned bison hides in replica of old robes which were scraped down quite thin to lessen the weight and bulk of the hide (Miller 1992:63, 65). This is one factor which explains why recent fake pictographic robes are so rare. Such may not have been the case in earlier times. Around 1853 when the poverty stricken German artist Balduin Möllhausen was in America he wrote in his diary that he had made friends with the Indians and made paintings in their manner on bison robes which he profitably sold to the fur trade (Graf 1991:88, note 310).² None of Möllhausen's forgeries have been identified in extant collections. I did find a pen and ink drawing of a war-exploit robe in the Möllhausen folio in the Smithsonian Institution archives, but it is much abbreviated, poorly observed and only remotely resembles an authentic robe of the period.

George Catlin created a varied and extensive array of bogus pictographic works. Most unusual were the "facsimiles" of painted robes found in his "Souvenir Unique" portfolio of lithographs held by the New York Public Library. These are noted for their phallic and anal imagery. Seemingly, Catlin invented his risqué pictographic narratives disguised as Indian war-exploit robes to entertain members of the Anglo society who could not ac-

cept such images emanating from their own ranks (Brownstone 1998). The subjects of Catlin's oil portraits represent almost every tribe on the plains. Shirts, robes, and tipis bearing pictographic war narratives are displayed with great frequency in these works. The pictographs were largely decorative filler, and were expeditiously rendered in a consistent style entirely of Catlin's making (Holm 1992:48). In two notable instances he modified this style by the addition of frog-like figures with triangular torsos and splayed legs and feet. One is a robe which once existed in the Provincial Museum of Ontario (cat.no. 27,091) said to have been collected by John S. Baxter, an assistant of Catlin (Annual Archaeological Report of Ontario 1905:27-31). John Ewers made the following comment on this robe: "I would have more confidence in the Baxter robe as adding credence to the Indianess of the style of figure[s] appearing on the shirts collected by Catlin if we did not know that Baxter had been associated with Catlin. Might it not add even more fuel to the fire that Catlin himself was responsible for this style of Indian pictography?" (Ewers, personal communication to Brownstone, 24 August 1991).

Ewers's hugely influential 1957 article "Early White Influence on Plains Indian Painting" postulated that Karl Bodmer and George Catlin's influence was responsible for the Mandan chief Four Bear's style of depiction, which departed strikingly from other known contemporary Plains Indian paintings, seemingly in the direction of European pictorialism (Ewers 1957). An important piece of evidence adduced by Ewers in support of his thesis was a pictographic shirt in the U.S. National Museum of Natural History collected by Catlin and thought to have belonged to Four Bears (cat.no. 386,505). However, in 1992 Holm demonstrated that Catlin had painted the shirt, and that Ewers erred in attributing to Catlin the stylistic development of Four Bears (Holm 1992). Although the evidence was spurious, the article by Ewers opened up an extremely important area of study and had a significant influence on at least one generation of researchers.

Although the fake robe painting has flawed my contribution to the *Feder festschrift*, its conclusions regarding the origins of six of the seven paintings remain relatively unscathed, because the falsification was based on a group of stylistically related works. If something good has resulted from

this experience it is the reminder, that undocumented works of Plains pictographic painting (and Native American works of art in general) should not be accepted as evidence as long as our understanding of tribal styles is still rudimentary. Since it will not always be as easy as in this case to identify a falsification on the basis of the faker's confession, the unlawful introduction of very deceptive "creative reproductions" over the past several decades makes it necessary to require positive documentary or physical evidence for at least the age of such works in order to use them as examples of historical styles.

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