



## In Choosing Indians As Subjects...

Nancy K. Anderson

In February 2004, Tom and Ann Barwick, collectors of American art living in Seattle, acquired a painting by George de Forest Brush that had not been seen publicly since 1899. Titled *An Aztec Sculptor*, the painting had been purchased by Thomas B. Clarke from the artist shortly after it was completed in 1887.<sup>1</sup> Clarke, one of the most important collectors of American art at the end of the nineteenth century, kept the painting until February 1899, when he sold more than three hundred works from his collection at auction. Emlen Newbold Lawrence, a wholesale druggist in New York, purchased the painting at the Clarke sale and it remained in his family through several generations. When *An Aztec Sculptor* came to light in 2004, it had been “unlocated” for more than one hundred years. Such has been the fate of a number of key works by George de Forest Brush, particularly the important Indian paintings completed during the decade of the 1880s. Studying Brush’s work and assessing his achievement has, therefore, been particularly difficult.

By the fall of 2004, when Tom and Ann Barwick offered *An Aztec Sculptor* to the National Gallery of Art as a promised gift, a number of these extraordinary paintings had come to light. Scholars had also begun to sort through surviving documents, establish an outline of the artist’s personal and professional life, and explore the cultural context in which Brush had created these works. In addition, the Smithsonian’s new National Museum of the American Indian had just opened in Washington, bringing increased attention to the complex issues associated with images of native people. All of these developments suggested that the time was right for both an exhibition and a scholarly publication focused on George de Forest Brush’s important Indian paintings.

Any discussion of Brush’s paintings of American Indians rightfully begins with the artist’s own statements. Aside from brief commentary in letters, the most revealing remarks appear

in articles written by Brush or in published interviews with the artist.<sup>2</sup> The earliest and most expansive of these, “An Artist among the Indians,” was commissioned in 1885 by Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *Century Magazine*, who specifically asked Brush to address the question of “Indians as subjects of pictorial art.”<sup>3</sup>

Brush began his response with reference to the impoverished Indians that travelers often saw as they passed through western railroad towns. He confessed that when he first observed these “wretched creatures,” he felt “deceived” by the romantic Indian stories he had read as a boy. Later, having lived with Shoshone, Arapahoe, and Crow Indians in Wyoming and Montana, Brush developed a far more realistic and sympathetic understanding of Indian culture. He readily acknowledged, however, that the Indian way of life would not suit the “civilized merchant, who loves one woman, and lives in a stone house.” Whether the Indian was “fit to enter the kingdom of heaven,” Brush declared, was a question entirely separate from the issue “of their artistic interest.” On that point, he was very clear. Young Indian men, living independently on their ancestral land, were the equal of the ancient Greeks in physical beauty and thus entirely suitable as subjects for art. Clearly stating his artistic intent, Brush declared:

*In choosing Indians as subjects for art, I do not paint from the historian’s or the antiquary’s point of view; I do not care to represent them in any curious habits which could not be comprehended by us; I am interested in those habits and deeds in which we have feelings in common. Therefore, I hesitate to attempt to add any interest to my pictures by supplying historical facts. If I were required to resort to this in order to bring out the poetry, I would drop the subject at once.*<sup>4</sup>

Brush chose two images to illustrate his article for *Century*, including the painting he had titled *Mourning Her Brave* (cat. 5).

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<sup>1</sup> George de Forest Brush, *Self-Portrait*, before 1890, National Academy Museum, New York

On a snowy precipice, beneath the shrouded body of her husband, a grieving widow stands barefoot, her clothing whipped by a cold winter wind. Explaining his intent in composing his painting, Brush declared that the rituals of mourning varied widely among cultural groups, but that all people experienced death and grief. Expression of the *common* emotion was his aim.

In 1883, when *Mourning Her Brave* was exhibited for the first time, several critics recognized the artist's intent and applauded his effort. One unidentified commentator wrote that Brush had "sought the elemental thing," had "laid his hand upon universal passions and emotions," and had "translated Indian life into a language which we can all understand. He has brought the eastern man and woman and their Indian brother heart to heart."<sup>5</sup>

*Mourning Her Brave* was one of Brush's earliest Indian paintings. Completed in New York in the fall of 1883, shortly after the artist returned from several months among the Crow Indians in Montana, the painting elicited considerable commentary from the press. For an artist struggling to find a subject that would set him apart from his equally talented and ambitious peers, Brush must have been gratified when he was commended for choosing a "distinctly American" subject (the Indian) and for translating "an elemental passion" into an "original and impressive form."<sup>6</sup> On a more practical level, the painting sold quickly, thus providing a financial incentive for Brush's experiment in addressing universal themes through the use of Indian subject matter.

Inevitably, as the decade of the 1880s progressed, the early idealism Brush expressed in his article for *Century* became more nuanced. He married, suffered the death of a child, became involved in political issues, traveled widely, and railed against what he perceived as the injustices of the art market. Over time, Brush effectively withdrew from the fray, first to his farm in

New Hampshire, and later abroad, but during the decade of the 1880s he was deeply engaged with the issues of the day and thoroughly immersed in the art world of New York. It was during this period that he produced the paintings of American Indians that are the focus of this exhibition and book.

By his own account, Brush began the Indian series in Wyoming in 1882 while living at Fort Washakie on the Wind River Reservation.<sup>7</sup> The paintings he produced during this early period reflect both his fascination with Indian culture and his attempt to identify universal emotions. As the decade progressed and his domestic responsibilities grew, Brush had less opportunity to observe American Indians in their own environment. He did not, however, abandon the subject. Instead, the Indian paintings became studio compositions, remotely related, if at all, to the reality of Indian life during the 1880s. The stunningly beautiful surfaces still dazzled the eye, but barely concealed beneath these seductive surfaces lay stinging criticism of a rapidly industrializing America that Brush found increasingly disturbing.

George de Forest Brush died in 1941. Well before the turn of the century, however, he had radically changed the focus of his art, moving from images of American Indians to portraits of women and children based on Florentine models. Brush began the first of these works in Paris in 1891. Using his wife and children as models, he began to create paintings that found a ready market in Gilded Age America. Although Brush was sometimes mentioned in the general histories of American art published during the first decades of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1950s when Harold McCracken (*Portrait of the Old West*, 1952) and Robert Taft (*Artists and Illustrators of the Old West*, 1953) published their studies of western American art that he received more than a passing mention.<sup>8</sup> In 1970, Nancy Douglas Bowditch, the artist's eldest daughter, published

a biography of her father that drew upon family lore as well as recollections of friends and acquaintances.

Exhibitions focused entirely on Brush's work have been few in number. In March 1922 a selection of works by the artist was shown at the Century Club in New York.<sup>9</sup> Eight years later, Grand Central Galleries in New York presented an exhibition (approximately 35 works) described in the press as Brush's first "one-man show."<sup>10</sup> In November 1933, the largest exhibition of work by Brush during his lifetime (105 paintings and drawings) opened at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York.<sup>11</sup> In 1968 a smaller selection of works was shown at the Bristol Art Museum in Rhode Island.<sup>12</sup> The most comprehensive exhibition of Brush's work to date was organized by Berry-Hill Galleries in New York in 1985. The exhibition was also seen at the Currier Gallery of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire; the Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio; and the Fine Arts Center at Cheekwood, in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>13</sup>

Modern scholarship on Brush began in 1980 when Joan Morgan completed a master's thesis at the University of Rochester on the ethnological significance of the artist's paintings of Indians. Three years later Morgan published an article in *American Art Journal* that drew upon her graduate work on the artist, and in 1985 she wrote the catalogue that accompanied the Brush exhibition at Berry-Hill Galleries.

The first dissertation on Brush was completed in 1989 by Mary Lublin at Columbia University. Although Lublin focused on the "mother and child" paintings, she prefaced her discussion of these works with a consideration of the artist's earlier subjects, including the Indian paintings. In 2002, Jennifer Roberts completed a master's thesis on Brush's Indian paintings at the University of Missouri. The following year, James Boyles completed a dissertation at the University of North Carolina that examined Brush's Indian and mythological subjects.

Emily Shapiro included a chapter on Brush's paintings of Indian artisans in her 2003 dissertation at Stanford University on the image of the artist in American genre painting. Much of this new and groundbreaking scholarship is included in the five interpretive essays in this catalogue.

Nancy Anderson, in an introductory essay, traces Brush's path through the decade of the 1880s and considers the historical, social, and cultural context in which he worked. James Boyles addresses the impact of Brush's academic training on his art and teaching. His examination begins during the 1870s when Brush studied at the National Academy of Design in New York and later under the French master Jean-Léon Gérôme at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He explores how Brush conveyed his deep-seated belief in the history and tradition of art by developing a working technique and visual vocabulary focused on the human figure. Upon his return to the United States, Brush applied his newly acquired skills to an American subject, the Indian. Combining Old World training and New World themes, Brush allied himself with a group of progressive "young men" who were intent upon transforming American art in late nineteenth-century New York.

Mary Lublin presents Brush's Indian paintings as a progressive artistic meditation on human creativity. She examines how Brush developed a distinct pictorial language, drawing his vocabulary from the emerging field of ethnology, and discusses his allegiance to nineteenth-century evolutionary theory. His naturalist subjects focus on the innate sensory responses that were considered the building blocks in the evolution of mankind. As he attempted to create subjects of universal appeal and to find an American equivalent for French Salon painting, Brush turned to quotations from masterpieces of past and contemporary art. Although progressive regarding many political, social, and scientific issues, Brush was also deeply

committed to the tradition of art and the craft of making culturally resonant images.

Emily Shapiro brings historical context and critical analysis to bear on an important subgenre of Brush's Indian images: the artist's numerous depictions of the Indian as skilled craftsman. Painted in an age characterized by the widespread mechanization of labor, Brush's meticulous renderings of Indian artisans, she posits, functioned as the visual protest of an academically trained painter against the devaluing of manual skill in modern work and modern art. She reveals Brush to have been an outspoken critic of industrial culture, arguing that the antimodern sentiment first articulated in these early paintings ultimately informed a career's worth of artistic initiatives.

Diane Dillon sets Brush against the backdrop of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, where he exhibited three of his Indian paintings. Because the fair celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the landing of Columbus in the New World, the indigenous peoples Columbus encountered loomed large in the event's visual culture. Brush's pictures also contributed to the exposition's broader popularization of neo-classical styles and anthropological subjects. More pointedly, the paintings synthesized many of the cultural contradictions that structured the fair: they evoked the interdependence of the primitive and the modern; authenticity and imitation; realism and illusion; education and entertainment; work and leisure; rare objects and mass-produced goods; European and American art; and the lively persistence of native cultures amid predictions about the vanishing race.

The paintings included in the exhibition are discussed at length in the catalogue section: all are reproduced in color; many, for the first time. A detailed chronology thoroughly documents Brush's activities during the decade of the 1880s,

when he executed his Indian paintings. It incorporates information drawn from the important correspondence between Brush and Charles Erskine Scott Wood discovered by James Boyles as well as recently discovered correspondence between Brush and Douglas Volk. The chronology concludes with a brief outline of the artist's later career.

It is the hope of the contributors that this publication will provide clarity regarding the biographical facts and creative accomplishments of Brush's early career as well as thoughtful interpretations of individual paintings. It is also the hope of the contributors that this volume will encourage others to investigate further Brush's life and work, for much can be learned from the study of an artist who did not embrace the rapid modernization of his era and whose work reflects not only his own disquiet, but that of other creative individuals who chose an alternative path as the nineteenth century hastened toward the twentieth.

## NOTES

1.

See cat. 11.

2.

Letters containing commentary by Brush are included in several major collections. Correspondence between Brush and Charles Erskine Scott Wood is held by the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Correspondence between Brush and Douglas Volk is at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, as is correspondence included in the Nancy Douglas Bowditch Papers and the William Robert Pearmain Family Papers. Additional letters are held by the Dublin Historical Society, Dublin, New Hampshire.

3.

First person commentary by Brush is listed in the bibliography under "Brush." See also Jillson 1901.

4.

Brush 1885, 57.

5.

J.R.W.H., "Unique Exhibition," *Boston Herald*, December 28, 1883, Clarke Papers. The author thanks James Boyles for sharing his research from the Thomas B. Clarke scrapbooks at the Archives of American Art.

6.

"American Artists' Work," *New York World*, December 28, 1883, Clarke Papers; "Mr. T.B. Clarke's Collection of American Pictures," *New York Tribune*, December 28, 1883, Clarke Papers.

7.

See Bowditch 1970, 20–23; Brush to Wood, January 15, 1883, Wood Papers (Huntington).

8.

For early references to Brush, see Hartmann 1902; Caffin 1902; Isham 1936 [1905]; Caffin 1907; Smith 1908; Du Bois 1918; Merrick 1922; Cortissoz 1923; Ely 1923; Daingerfield 1930; and Neuhaus 1931.

9.

The Century Club exhibition opened March 4, 1922. An extensive review was published in the *New York Tribune*, March 12, 1922. The author thanks Jonathan Harding for his assistance with information regarding this exhibition.

10.

*Art Digest* (January 1, 1930, 32) reported that the exhibition was open and would remain on view through January 18. *Art News* (January 4, 1930) reported that the exhibition would open January 7.

11.

The exhibition opened on November 10, 1933, and remained on view through May 1, 1934. An illustrated catalogue accompanied the show.

12.

The Bristol Art Museum exhibition opened on June 20 and closed July 8, 1968.

13.

See Morgan 1985.