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Book analyzes aesthetics of Americanization

by Melissa Jones

THE ART OF AMERICANIZATION AT THE CARLISLE INDIAN SCHOOL

By Hayes Peter Mauro

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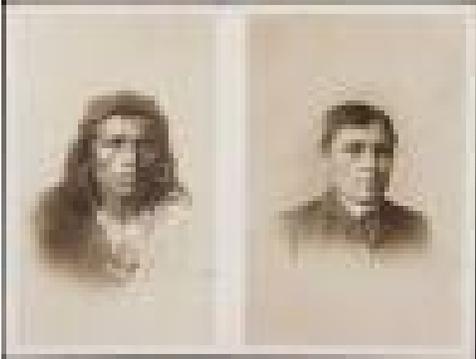
The body is the temple of the spirit. Clothes make the man. A picture is worth a thousand words. Nowadays these old axioms might elicit a groan. Not so, however, in the American Gilded Age, when each of these aphorisms represented unquestioned truth distilled down to verbal snapshots. This was when our country was structured upon a belief in the absolute truth that the pinnacle of civilized society was Anglo-American white Protestant capitalism.

At this time, the Western frontier was mostly tamed and the United States was moving toward becoming a modern industrial power. There was a minor problem, though, with those troublesome Native Americans who, with their attachment to the land, their superstitious beliefs and their primitive cultures, still impeded America's march to modernization.

Gen. Philip Sheridan expressed one solution to the problem in 1869, and his opinion became the source of a long-lived trope: "The only good Indian is a dead Indian." However, by the 1870s, it became clear that although a good effort had been made to do so, slaughtering all of America's indigenous population was not a viable option.

Given this context, a solution proposed by Gen. Richard Henry Pratt seemed much more humane. Pratt said the answer to the "Indian question" was to "kill the Indian, save the man." To do this, Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania in 1879, to train Native American youth in the skills and customs of modern society. The school's apparent success led to the establishment of government-sponsored Indian schools across the United States.

In *The Art of Americanization at the Carlisle Indian School*, art historian Hayes Peter Mauro analyzes "before and after" photographs that Pratt commissioned to prove how well his educational techniques worked. Much has been written about Carlisle, Indian schools in general, and even the photographs related to these schools, but Mauro takes a unique approach and analyzes how these photographs show the overall aesthetics of Americanization at work.



Pratt brought children, voluntarily and involuntarily, from their

families, reservations and tribal support systems to his paramilitary residential boarding school to be transformed into American citizens who would, as Mauro puts it, "value Christianity over spiritualism, competition over tribalism, and physical hygiene and mental discipline over the alleged dirt and sloth of reservation life."

Mauro sometimes falls into the jargon of art history, or spends a bit too much time on the historical context of phrenology and the prevailing racism of the time. He is at his best when he goes beyond the standard historical analysis and discusses what the manipulation of these young students' bodies actually meant. Pratt sought to change the clothes, hygiene, posture and worldviews of these students. It is not too far of a stretch to conclude that Pratt believed the physical trappings of Anglo-American civilization could purify the very soul of a "savage."

Mauro takes a scholarly and balanced approach, but it is tempting to look for a villain in this book and the top contender for this role is Pratt, who so effectively convinced Washington bureaucrats that the best thing for these children was to rip them from their homes. However, considering the then prevailing "better dead than red" context it is too easy to condemn Pratt, or the teachers who worked to "kill the Indian, save the man" or the photographers who provided the "proof" of the school's success in doing so.

Mauro notes that the photographs, done mostly by John N. Choate and Frances Benjamin Johnston, were used as propaganda to maintain Carlisle's popularity and funding. Did the photographers just work for the money? Were they entranced, as many photographers have been, by the beauty of Native Americans and their culture? Did they, like Pratt, think they were saving young lives by helping these children to assimilate into the superior Anglo-American culture?

Sadly, Pratt's "transformations" were only posed images. Mauro writes that many of these children died of illness, accident or violence, and those who survived rarely managed to fit into either white society or back into their tribal communities.

This book succeeds in revealing the real truth shown by these photos -- that these children were violated, body and soul, by a conquering government that wanted to eradicate every vestige of the Native American in the United States. Mauro demonstrates that a picture, properly seen, is certainly worth a thousand words.

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[Melissa Jones, an editor in Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif., is a former photojournalist who worked many years with the Yavapai of Fort McDowell, Ariz., and for *NCR*.]

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