
Author Neal Keating describes, interprets, and provides social commentary in this thorough art history of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also known as the Six Nations, comprising of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Iroquoian tribes. Keating states that "political struggle clearly has a visual dimension" and accordingly focuses on the use of art to adapt to changing social environments. Art spanning four hundred years, by artists sharing a biological and spiritual connection through kinship, ethnicity, land, history, and culture, has undergone much criticism, having its authenticity scrutinized for depicting a people's changing social consciousness. The author asks "Why is it so difficult to evaluate Native art using the same criteria as any other art?" and posits that doing so would require recognizing the validity of Native consciousness, and would draw the mainstream historical narrative into question.

Four broad eras of time, delimited by shifts in power, are covered. The author references archaeological and ethnohistorical research to describe the "Era of Autonomy," a period before the arrival of European colonists in North America. Body painting and carved stone tablets associated with death and spirituality are examined, providing evidence of a sharing of iconography over a long distance. The Colonial Era, beginning with the arrival of Europeans, is characterized by wars and epidemics. Art from this period is related to warfare and has an emphasis on identity. Keating investigates tree paintings, tattooing and body painting, painted posts in villages, drawings on boards in residences, decorations on clubs, and watercolor on paper as examples of tumultuous times. The Neo-colonial Era was marked by dispossession and pressures to assimilate, Indian residential schools, and cultural eradication. The Decolonizing Era arises out of the human rights movement in response to government termination policies. Oren Lyons (Onondaga) says in a Bill Moyers interview "as long as there is one to sing and one to dance, one to speak and one to listen, life will go on." Culture will survive, be renewed, and be reclaimed.

Keating's artist biographies, historical background, and discussion relating the past to the present, provide a needed resource on contemporary Haudenosaunee artists. Contemporary art information generally comes from exhibition catalogs, but this book is far more comprehensive. It builds on traditional Iroquoian art resources such as those by William N. Fenton. While other works look at Native art as ritual objects or discuss the white perspective of Native art, this book is much more concerned with interpreting the art. It includes seventy-five color plates, black-and-white reproductions, an index, a bibliography, and appendices on documentary research, and a list of painters and photographers. Highly recommended for a scholarly audience, graduate level studies, and researchers.

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