
Christian F. Feest and C. Ronald Corum. *Frederick Weygold: Artist and Ethnographer of North American Indians*. Altenstadt: ZKF Publishers, 2017. 272 pp. ISBN: 978-3981841206.

<https://www.zkfpublishers.de/books/frederick-weygold/>

This biography of the artist Frederick Weygold was co-edited by Christian F. Feest, Professor of Anthropology, and Charles Ronald Corum, a neurophysiologist. The book follows Weygold's life chronologically, from his birth in 1870 in St. Charles, Missouri, USA, through his various travels and career paths, until his death in 1941 in Louisville, Kentucky. This sequential linearity is sectioned in thematic chapters such as "Painted Tipis," "Collecting in Pine Ridge," or "Too Civilized to Go to War."

Given that Corum is a neurophysiologist, his involvement in an artist's biography can appear surprising at first. The preface explains that he learned the Lakota language from David W. Maurer, who himself learned it from Weygold's notes. Interested in Lakota culture since the 1970s, Corum has researched the artist's life for more than forty years. Between 1973 and 1978, as a graduate student from the University of Louisville, Corum visited the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Lakota Sioux reservations in South Dakota. The research material he gathered was later digitized, and donated to his alma mater in 2013. This "C. Ronald Corum Lakota Research Collection" was then shared with the Woksape Tipi Library and Archives at the Oglala Lakota College in Kyle, South Dakota, as an act of repatriation. Unfortunately, some of Feest's wordings in *Frederick Weygold* describing Corum's interest in Lakota culture, such as his "fascination with Native American spirituality", diminish his research and dedication by suggesting a more romanticized and stereotypical generalization of Lakota and Native American peoples. Despite the exemplary biographical research, scrupulous attention to detail, and a striking visual corpus of pictures, paintings, sketches, and reproductions, *Frederick Weygold: Artist and Ethnographer of North American Indians* falls short of our expectation of historically accurate contextualization.

The detailed biographical research done by Corum is truly admirable, but Feest's frequent use of words such as "perhaps," "surely," or the convoluted "it is inconceivable that he did not" constantly weaken the historical reports on Weygold's actions, tainting every chapter with uncertainty and scruple. The corpus of sources for *Frederick Weygold* comprises correspondence with his family, friends, and fellow researchers, as well as letters to and from art dealers and museums both in Germany and the United States. Corum also used Weygold's personal notes and journals, and completed these texts with archival documents from newspapers and museum catalogues. From train tickets to shopping lists and drafts jotted on the back of art school assignments, the amount of textual information gathered by Corum is incredible. He also had access to digitized documents, drawings, and interviews on cassette tapes. Considering such a rich wealth of biographical material, it is even more surprising that Feest's text would express hesitation and gaps so often in its accounts of Weygold's travels.

The compendium of images used to illustrate the text is as diverse and interesting as the compilation of documents. Sketches, drawings, paintings, book illustrations, photographs and postcards are among the visual elements you will find in *Frederick Weygold*. Furthermore, the quality of the reproductions is excellent. The inclusion of letters and documents from German

museums offers the rare opportunity for a glimpse into the politics of what was called “primitive art” acquisition and conservation in the late 19th century. The authors also provide us with the successive steps taken by Weygold to provide his peers with ethnographic studies, when this field of study was only starting to emerge as such in Western academia.

Amateur anthropologists like Weygold were able to speak with authority on Lakota culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but their work and collections are under scrutiny today. As others did at that time, Weygold taught himself the language by studying missionary dictionaries, and then visited Lakota reservations to purchase items such as tipis, regalia, or ceremonial tools for European and American museums and art dealers. Although his legitimacy as an ethnographer was not questioned at the time, it should be contextualized for modern readers, whereas the contemporary colonial contexts and policies are only vaguely brushed upon.

The description of the extermination of the buffalo is a good example of lack of historical contextualization. This act was facilitated by the American government under pressure to secure more land for settlement because of the Gold Rush and transcontinental railroad expansion projects. “Hunting by rail” was advertised, and masses of hunting parties rode the Kansas Pacific trains while shooting buffaloes from the wagon roofs and windows, leaving behind thousands of carcasses to rot on the plains. State governments encouraged the practice, because the decimation of the buffalo helped their colonial policies. These animals were the main source of food, clothing, and shelter, and without them Native populations on the Plains were forced into signing treaties with the government in the hope of getting housing supplies and food rations. This allowed new white settlers to install farms and cattle on the land. In *Frederick Weygold*, this crucial period of colonial history, with all its political, industrial, and economic ramifications, is reduced to a single neutral sentence: “the bison skins had gone out of use among the Lakotas [after] the buffalo herds had disappeared” (19).

Other problematic oversights include the suggestion that ancestral cultural practices were “forgotten” or simply removed from the chain of transmission. The devastating consequences of land theft, boarding schools, and missionary work on Lakota customs are insidiously absent from most of the narrative. Although these accounts were common at the time, it is very problematic to find them unaddressed, and moreover even propagated, in a 2017 publication on North American ethnography. It amounts to dangerous revisionism. Great progress has been made towards more culturally accurate historical studies of American colonization, both in academia and in the political sphere. This book is a step backwards. Moreover, several references are made to Weygold’s admiration for Edward S. Curtis and Karl Bodmer. They too were non-native artists who travelled throughout the U.S. to photograph and paint portraits of Native American people they encountered. Their work has also been praised for artistic qualities as well as ethnographic value, but their reputation has been constantly revised in the last two decades. Their accounts of Native American societies are more recently criticized as partly, if not greatly, fabricated, following the steady fashion for romanticizing of their generation. Like Curtis, Weygold is said to have provided culturally foreign items to Lakota models, or removed elements, such as ribbons (41), to erase visual clues of Western assimilation before photographing them for his postcards. This demonstrates his attachment to unrealistic, romantic notions of what American Indians should look like.

In thoroughly examining this work, it appears as though the authors were aware of Weygold's cultural faux-pas, but chose to try to excuse not only his mistakes, but also the problematic behaviors of ethnographers of his time. His interest in preserving art, and later his activism for the respect of Native American rights, are undeniably commendable. However, his expertise in the field of Lakota studies is shrouded throughout this biography in conspicuous attempts at disguising errors and wrong-doing under the guise of praising his efforts. Weygold's early reports on painted tipis are labelled as careful and insightful, though at the same time it is mentioned that he had never met a real Native person, nor read any scholarly work on the topic at the time of his writing (18). Feest tells us that over the course of his ethnographic career, Weygold made numerous appraisal, identificative, and interpretative mistakes. He also chronically omitted attributions, museum or archival details, and catalog numbers of the objects he traded and/or sketched for his clients (23). He purposely lied on listings, and spread false information on the Plains items he was acquiring for, or selling to, museums (36, 50). These gaps in research and ethical violations are often mentioned but never addressed.

All in all, *Frederick Weygold: Artist and Ethnographer of North American Indians* is a pleasing close-up on a life dedicated to visual arts. Despite questionable oversights concerning the socio-historical contexts of Native American ethnography and policy of the late 19th and early 20th century, as well as numerous typographical errors that were overlooked by the editors, it is a truly original book, full of detailed biographical anecdotes and high-quality representations, pictures, and photographs. It provides comprehensive descriptions of the earliest ethnographic studies of Plains tipi construction and painting. Although it may disconcert some Native American scholars and readers, it is also likely to please early ethnography enthusiasts, and admirers of Plain Indians' visual arts.

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