



BOOK REVIEW:

Gunlög Fur. *Painting Culture, Painting Nature: Stephen Mopope, Oscar Jacobson, and the Development of Indian Art in Oklahoma*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. 356 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8061-6287-4.

In early 1927, four young Kiowa men left their reservation to begin taking art classes at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, where their mentor would be a Swedish-born professor, Oscar Jacobson. This unusual arrangement, and the friendships that resulted from it, are the topics of Gunlög Fur's *Painting Culture, Painting Nature*. Fur, a professor of history at Linnaeus University in Sweden and a member of the Swedish Academy of Letters, History, and Antiquities, has long championed a perspective that views the histories of immigrants and Indians as intertwined, and the elegant approach of this book allows her to bring that perspective down to a personal level by looking at the relationship between Jacobson and the most prominent of the Kiowa artists, Stephen Mopope, who, after his time in Norman, would work as a painter for the rest of his life.

Painting Culture, Painting Nature provides the reader with extensive biographies of both men, but what really interests the author is what her introduction calls the "anatomy" of their friendship, and how it was affected by attitudes and policies toward Indians and immigrants in the first third of the twentieth century. To that end, Fur offers extensive contexts for the two, as well as a useful history of the state they both called home, Oklahoma.

To explain the work and inspiration of Mopope, *Painting Culture, Painting Nature* discusses the

plight of the Kiowa after defeats suffered in wars against the US military in the late 1800s. Deprived of the buffalo that had sustained their way of life for generations and confined to reservations which limited their mobility, and where poverty and disease were major challenges, the Kiowa feared that their culture and traditions would vanish altogether. To Mopope and others, painting became an essential way to keep their cultural heritage alive, and changing from traditional surfaces like hides and tipis to paper and canvas was not an insurmountable challenge. In addition to being an artist, Mopope was also widely known as a skillful dancer, another way in which he and other Kiowa preserved traditions. In both paintings and in dancing, he deftly managed to balance often-stereotypical white expectations of what "true" Indians were against the need to adhere to tribal history and tradition.

When it comes to Jacobson, Fur stresses that he was born in Sweden and came to the United States with his family as a young boy. The destination for the Jacobsons was Lindsborg, a small town in central Kansas that was settled by Swedish immigrants, and where two of Oscar's older brothers were already living. Initially missing the family farm on a Baltic Sea island, young Oscar soon took to the wide-open spaces of his new home state, exploring the surroundings of Lindsborg on a newly acquired pony (and often

skipping out of farm work, to his father's annoyance). Fur argues that Jacobson's childhood and youth in Lindsborg, where he attended Bethany College, a Swedish-American educational institution, were essential in making him identify as a Westerner. From Bethany, he would go on to take art classes at Yale, and then to take up teaching positions in Minneapolis and Washington state before accepting an appointment as director of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Oklahoma, still a fledgling institution when Jacobson and his wife arrived there in 1915. It was in that capacity that he crossed paths with Stephen Mopope in the late 1920s.

While their initial relationship was that of teacher and student, it would evolve after Mopope left Norman. Jacobson continued to promote the work of the Kiowa (who, for a long time, were not allowed to travel outside the reservation without authorization from reservation officials and also needed a white person as a chaperone), arranging, among other things, for Mopope to paint murals on the walls of a local post office at the height of the Depression. Mopope and his friends had been frequent visitors to the Jacobson home in Norman while they were students, and Oscar Jacobson would in later years visit Mopope on the reservation. The professor would also use his contacts to arrange for exhibitions throughout the Southwest, and even in Europe, although Mopope himself soon turned out to be astute in maintaining contacts with potential buyers on his own. In a thoughtful conclusion, Fur asks whether Jacobson and Mopope could be friends, given their very different situations in life. Her answer is yes.

A central theme in *Painting Culture, Painting Nature* is that both men were outsiders in American society, and that this may have strengthened their relationship. Fur readily acknowledges that their circumstances were radically different: although emigration inevitably entails a sense of loss, there is an enormous difference between

Oscar Jacobson's rather well-to-do family voluntarily leaving Sweden for greater opportunities in America and Stephen Mopope's ancestors being forced onto a small area of land and treated as wards of the government. Scandinavian immigrants in the 1920s also did not encounter prejudice from mainstream society in the way that Native Americans did. It is telling, for instance, that the Kiowa students in Norman were habitually referred to as "boys," even though Mopope was in his thirties when the group attended the university.

Fur also devotes attention to the paintings of both men and how they reflect their divergent views. Jacobson was a great admirer of Swedish landscape painters such as Bruno Liljefors, who often portrayed nature as untouched by humans, and his own work, depicting scenes from the Southwest, followed similar lines. Fur connects Jacobson's landscape painting to his youth in Lindsborg, where stories of the Swedish settlement's founding stressed that the newcomers from Sweden came to wide open, untouched spaces, ignoring the long-standing indigenous presence there. Mopope's work, by contrast, concerns itself with people doing everyday chores, dancing, and courting; his spaces are not void of a human presence. As the author puts it in a nice reference to the title of her book, Mopope painted culture, Jacobson nature. And, just as his nature scenes tended to emphasize a bygone time, Jacobson had firm opinions that Native American art should be traditional and "genuine." Watercolor was preferred, for instance, while oil was seen as far less acceptable. Mopope was more open to adapting his art to new influences.

Painting Culture, Painting Nature is a fascinating read, and Gunlög Fur is open about its few shortcomings. As she notes, chronicling the life of Oscar Jacobson is fairly easy, as a great deal of source materials exist, including a detailed account by his wife. For Stephen Mopope, source

materials are scarcer, often consisting of accounts by white reservation officials with patronizing attitudes. As a result, Jacobson's life looms somewhat larger than Mopope's in the book.

It could also be debated to what extent Oscar Jacobson was representative of Swedish immigrants to the United States. Although he was born in Sweden, his arrival in the United States at a young age made him more like the second-generation Swedish Americans who were becoming an increasingly prominent part of the Swedish immigrant community in the 1920s: he received an American high-school education and clearly was comfortable with English. Although it was founded by Swedish settlers, "the Americans" and the English language had made clear inroads in the Lindsborg of Jacobson's youth, and it is telling that his exploits in the town as a young man were chronicled in the English-language *Lindsborg Record* rather than in the Swedish-language weekly *Lindsborgs-Posten*. Jacobson's time at Yale and his marriage to a French-born fellow faculty member also set him apart from many of his fellow Swedish Americans. Although a miniature Viking ship hung in his summer cabin in Colorado as a symbol of his roots, and although he was part of a nationwide network of Swedish-American artists, what emerges from Fur's book is the image of a man who more readily identified himself as an American Westerner than as a Swedish immigrant. That, however, is a minor point. Overall, *Painting Culture, Painting Nature* is a rich and rewarding work.

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