

# THE HIGH ART OF THE ARTIFACT BOOK

By Duane Esarey

A review of *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*. The Art Institute of Chicago 2004. Edited by Richard F. Townsend. Catalogue for an exhibition at The Art Institute of Chicago (November 20, 2004 to January 30, 2005); The Saint Louis Art Museum (March to May, 2005); and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (July to September, 2005), 28 pages, 440 illustrations (320 color illustrations). Yale University Press: Cloth \$60.00, Paper \$34.95.

Just ask any artifact collector, amateur archaeologist, art historian, or confused under-graduate in archaeology. Everyone wonders about this. Some archaeologists, paradoxical as it seems, don't seem to be any more impressed with beautiful, unbroken artifacts than bits and pieces. Archaeologists tend to publish even their most spectacular finds in obscure field reports and stuffy articles – where they spend as much effort illustrating grinding stones as ornate pottery vessels. Some archaeologists express an almost obtuse disinterest in the more “eye catching” artifacts of their field. This is because the human behavior archaeologists seek to understand is found equally in grinding stones and statues. And archaeological literature is bound by obligation to detail, which generally equates to lengthy and convoluted text. Even the most successful archaeological investigation is often not enthralling, but the details there absolutely have to be accessible to other archaeologists to evaluate.

So archaeology isn't “about” flashy artifacts. Data and theory separate archaeologists from story-tellers (at least when we can be separated) and the further we get from those staid realms, the less comfortable we tend to be.

Some archaeologists almost seem to be in denial about this – we don't get our drudge work out of the way and then, finally free of mundane obligation, rush to press with the

latest outstanding item. Much as some academics in general can be accused of a fondness for affective, loquacious, or even intentionally specious jargon (if you can imagine that), some archaeologists are guilty of an affected nonchalance about spectacular artifacts (or as we say in the business, *the material correlates of human socio-political, religious, and artistic behavior*). Unfortunately, the reasons behind the primary focus of archaeologists on the information within artifacts, and

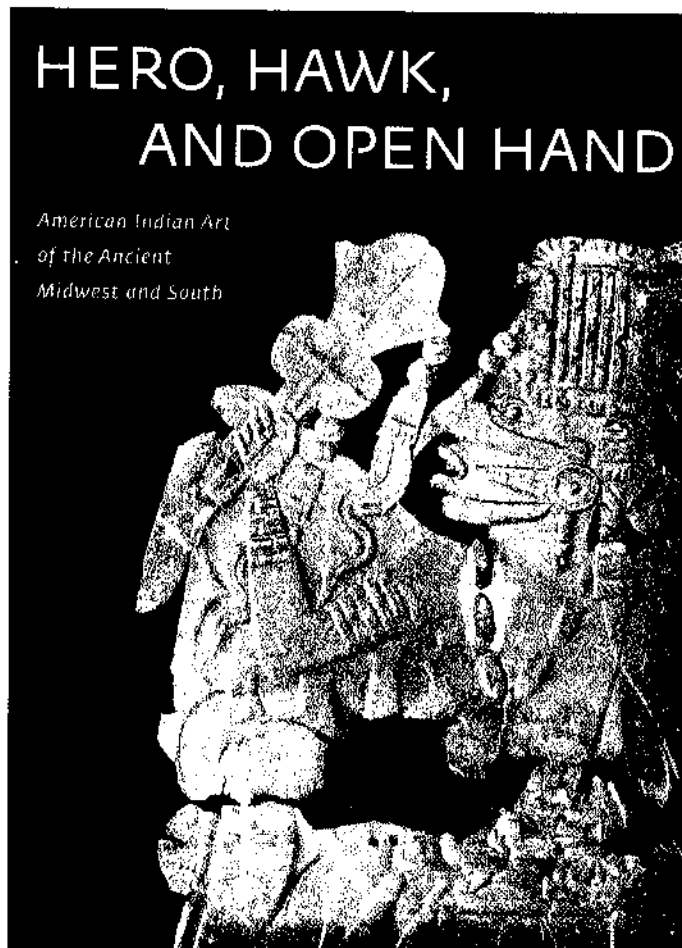
study. Such studies are of intense interest to many people and would have benefited from the injection of archaeological perspectives. Archaeological artifacts are the legitimate realm of archaeology, art history, and ethnological studies, and of course the participants in traditional cultural systems relevant to those artifacts. But, for most of the twentieth century, and for understandable reasons, much of North American archaeology has had barriers between it and others who have interests in

archaeological artifacts. For equally understandable reasons, those walls are now very rapidly coming down. Social and legal changes have made convergent perspectives not only possible, but desirable and urgently relevant to all concerned. The walls are coming down and collaborations are on, and there is a lot to talk about.

The artifacts selected for the exhibit *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand* are extraordinarily vocal even without the collaborative efforts of scholars to interpret them. The exhibit opens November 20, 2004 at the Art Institute of Chicago, but the exhibit catalog is already in print. Basically, the gist of this review is that I'm telling you to take an action. I mean right now. Buy this book. Immediately. In *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand* we have the best chosen, best illustrated, best understood, best explained, most visually pleasing presentation of the “best” artifacts from the Midwest and Southeastern United States that has ever been housed on any stripe of book user's shelf or graced any well-appointed coffee table. The artifacts are speaking with all the

contextual depth that a wonderful collaboration of scholars from various fields can put to voice with words and images. In turn, the scholarship is speaking with all the force that multidisciplinary depth and the most spectacular artifact images available can lend. There is power in both realms. And a rare balance is achieved here.

Some of these artifacts have been often-



their contextual associations with other kinds of excavated data, often get lost behind the affectation that we are disinterested in artifacts altogether.

Until the last two or three decades, the apparent obsession of some North American archaeologists to avoid the appearance of obsession with artifacts kept them from participating in entire paradigms of artifact use and

illustrated and often seen in exhibits. Buy the book anyway, these photos are better. Other very

conference paper compendium. That volume, better known as "Cottonlandia," was published in 1989 and gives a survey level of access to over 350 spectacular artifacts.

We have a progression of more than alliterative titles here. *Sun Circles and Human Hands* supplied a flood of images, but Fundaburk and Foreman's text and captions weren't essays so much as excerpts. The images, but not the text, were cited in mainstream archaeological literature. The "Detroit book" changed that. The perspectives in its essays exploded into mainstream literature citations and formed the views of the "bigpicture" of many budding archaeologists during

The essays will become mainstream citations. The illustrations will show up for decades – used everywhere from academic lectures to pirate web sites. This book is here to stay, and we may well witness a further paradigm shift as some archaeologists lift their heads above their data sets to consider the themes set out in the volume.

I could go on. I could tell you about the 19 chapters and the strong healthy mix of art, archaeology, history, and traditional culture subjects the 17 authors address. But even an overview of the content would seem endless. I could tell you that this exhibit has over 300 artifacts compared to the Detroit exhibit's 132. I could even pick a few nits, which would seem ungrateful considering the banquet that has been spread before us. It would also be pointless, because you have to buy this book no matter what. Go to the Art Institute's web site for details: <http://www.artic.edu/aic/books/subherohawk.html>, or search the words "Hero Hawk Open Hand" at <http://yalepress.yale.edu/YupBooks/>. You can even get a break on the hard cover version at Amazon.com. My message to you is the first thought that flashed through me when I laid eyes on "Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand ... "I've got to buy this book!" And that is what



Engraved circular palet: Naples, Illinois, Winchester Mound, 100 B.C. - A.D. 300; siltstone; Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.

important artifacts have been seldom illustrated and were greatly in need of a high-quality exposition. That has been done. And a few of the artifacts... well, a few of them can even stop a jaded old archaeologist like me in his tracks – because he's never seen nor heard of them. But here they are – magnificent photos of them. Take note of the vital statistics – 288 pages contain 440 illustrations – and 320 of the illustrations are color photos. This is not merely a favorable ratio of color plates – this is unprecedented, as is the quality of the photos.

As far as the effect this book will have on Southeastern and Midwestern archaeology, let's briefly consider past standard "artifact books." *Sun Circles and Human Hands* introduced two generations to the best artifact compendium that Eastern North American archaeology had to offer in the 1950s. But the images are mostly small and all are grey scale. More to the point, consider *Ancient Art of the American Woodland Indians*, published in 1985 as part of a blockbuster display of 132 artifacts organized by the Detroit Institute of Arts. More than any other influence, the "Detroit Hand book" (so nicknamed for the 2000-year-old mica hand on its cover) plowed the ground that this magnificent crop of scholarship and exposition in Chicago has now grown upon. And then, to complete the pattern, consider *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, a scholarly exhibit and

ing these last two decades. The "Cottonlandia" illustrations were more varied, but small grey scale images caused first-rate scholarship to



Raven effigy platform pipe; Pike County, Illinois, Bedford site, A.D. 200-400; conglomerate stone; Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

hold firm sway over the artifacts' inherent vocality. *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand* is not only the latest culmination of this trend. It is a powerhouse of content in both realms – a masterpiece of powerful balance for the genre.

I did. My most persistent other thought is that you will want to do the same.

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