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Eternal Sovereigns: Indigenous Artists, Activists, and Travelers Reframing Rome

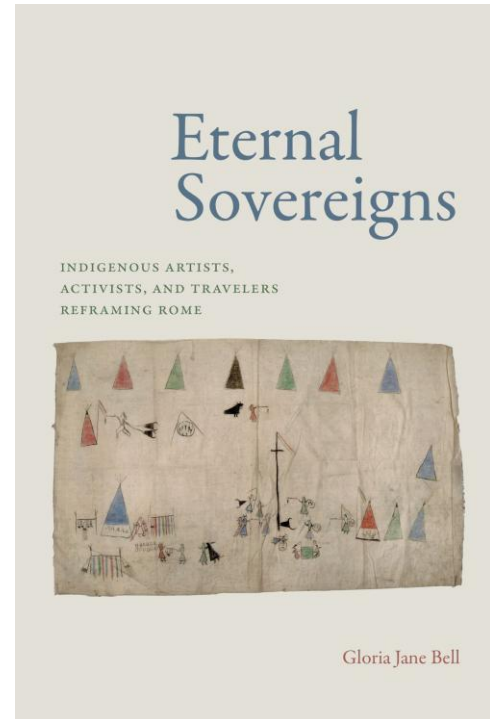
By Gloria Jane Bell

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Reviewed by: Yve Chavez

In *Eternal Sovereigns: Indigenous Artists, Activists, and Travelers Reframing Rome*, art historian Gloria Jane Bell provides a powerful critique and overdue analysis of the Vatican Missionary Exposition (VME) of 1925. The VME was a group of themed exhibitions on view in Vatican City over the course of one year. Pope Pius XI sponsored the VME to celebrate Catholic missionary work and display materials from “the Americas, Oceania, and Africa” that missionaries had acquired and sent to Rome (4). Dioramas with wax figures representing people from missionized Indigenous communities also appeared within the exhibitions, including those featured in the Hall of the Americas, which is the focus of Bell’s book. Bell does not concentrate on the missionaries who collected the materials; instead, she argues that the celebration of missionary work and treatment of Indigenous Peoples as a “vanishing race” throughout the VME denied “the modernity of the makers and their artistic, cultural, and spiritual ancestries and iconographic traditions” (62). She addresses the misleading messaging of the VME and offers a counternarrative that centers the experiences of Indigenous Peoples who lived in or visited Rome before, during, and after the VME of 1925. Utilizing her perspective as a Métis scholar and community member, Bell confronts a difficult history that continues to haunt Indigenous communities. Her discussion of the VME speaks to issues that scholars in related fields are also confronting, especially regarding the ongoing generational trauma of genocide and the subjugation of Indigenous Peoples at Catholic missions. *Eternal Sovereigns* dignifies Indigenous voices that are missing from colonial archives.

Bell draws upon the art-historical method of visual analysis as well as Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies. She not only re-stories the VME by centering Indigenous perspectives, but she also presents the story of her own research experience. Bell’s insight



into the challenges of navigating archives and museum collections that remain largely inaccessible underscores the realities of research that scholars rarely make known to their readers. In doing so, Bell makes her work accessible beyond an academic audience and opens it more broadly to Indigenous community members. *Eternal Sovereigns* is an engaging text that undergraduate and graduate students across art history, museum studies, and Indigenous studies will also find useful.

Each chapter of the book focuses on a specific topic related to the Vatican Missionary Exposition and the Vatican Ethnological Museum, which was founded after the exposition's closing, as they relate to Indigenous communities in Turtle Island (modern-day Canada and the United States). At the start of each chapter, the author shares a personal story from her research journey, describing how she felt while navigating the archives and reflecting on the lives of Indigenous artists, activists, and travelers who came before her. Bell explains that she uses storytelling as a method for "shifting the narrative" (18).¹

The introduction begins with Bell describing her first visit to the Vatican Museums and laying the scene for the 1925 VME and the Missionary Ethnological Museum, which changed its name to the Ethnological Museum Anima Mundi in 2019. Interestingly, she does not capitalize the title of pope when referring to Pius XI by name. Though she does not explain why, this may be read as part of her goal to deconstruct and disempower what she terms "pope culture," which drove the VME and its "ethos of conquest and plunder that harkens back to the exploitation of Indigenous peoples since the Renaissance" (4).

Bell situates the Ethnological Museum collections as "cultural belongings and travelers that were sent to Rome but never returned home" (5). Her choice of words reflects the shift in the field of Native American art studies toward using the term "belongings" when referring to Indigenous cultural materials.² Similarly, Bell uses terms that recognize these objects' worth in her book's title—*Eternal Sovereigns*—to "reclaim, restore, and re-story Indigenous visual and material culture" while also examining "the competing sovereignties of settler, Indigenous, and papal visual culture" (6). She underscores the necessity of her effort by noting the fact that no Native makers' names were recorded in the Vatican collections and that Indigenous voices are missing from the Vatican archives (7–8, 11).

In addition to addressing the absence of past voices, Bell confronts the "structural violence" she and other Indigenous scholars have faced in trying to access Vatican materials (11). Bell encountered "reticent and reluctant" Vatican representatives whose gatekeeping of Vatican archives she deems "unethical" (11–12). While it is unfortunate Bell had to encounter these obstacles in her research pursuits, her willingness to not give up her project and address institutional challenges is a powerful step forward for the Indigenous community.

Chapter 1, "Unsettling the Indian Museum in Rome: Ferdinand Pettrich and Edmonia Wildfire Lewis," looks at the prehistory of the VME and provides a comparative analysis of the lives and work of a Native (Edmonia Lewis) and non-Native (Ferdinand Pettrich) artist who both worked in Rome in the mid-nineteenth century. Pettrich was a German artist and creator of the "so-called Indian museum," which he operated from 1837 until 1857. He received a papal commission and donated the collection to the Vatican in 1858. Pettrich's sculpture "conformed to the myth of the vanishing Indian," and his museum placed Indigenous Peoples in the past (30). Lewis was an Ojibwe African Haitian artist who was in

Rome from 1866 to about 1895. Bell considers Lewis's artistic experiences from an Indigenous perspective. She postulates that Lewis never returned to her ancestral homelands in part due to the "multiple forms of trauma Lewis faced on Turtle Island" (40) and grants her greater agency and awareness of her circumstances. Noting that her art was not "merely autobiographical," Bell argues that Lewis's marble sculptures of Indigenous subjects made visible the existence of people whom genocide threatened to erase (46–47).

In chapter 2, "'The Most Exhaustive Record of the World's Progress Ever Displayed': Pope Pius XI's Culture of Conquest and Visitors' Experiences at the Vatican Missionary Expedition," Bell unpacks the VME through a decolonizing lens. She argues that "all the publications and the visual culture produced by the Vatican for the VME formed part of this papal culture, an ethos of conquest that continues the exploitation of Indigenous peoples," noting that the VME exhibits used terms such as "grotesque" and "pagan idols" to describe Indigenous material culture, including baskets, beadwork, and dolls (57). To process the trauma that the Vatican and its archives embody, Bell draws on Dian Million's "felt theory," which addresses the experiences of Native women scholars (61). Million argues "that academia repetitively produces gatekeepers to our entry into important discourses because we *feel* our histories as well as think them."³ The inclusion of felt theory is a useful model for other scholars of Indigenous art.

Bell ends chapter 2 by highlighting parallel strategies employed at contemporaneous fairs and expositions, such as the 1911 *The World* in Boston and the 1927 *Native and Modern Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art*. She identifies shared attitudes across these shows, such as the treatment of Indigenous practices as ethnographic or "primitive" rather than on par with Western fine art (84) and the celebration of imperialism and missionary work. Bell then pivots to the Venice Biennale of 1932, which was the first to treat Native art as fine art, recognizing the creators "as artists rather than anonymous makers" (85).

Chapter 3, "'A Window on the World' of Colonial Unknowing: Dioramas, Children's Games, and Missionary Perspectives at the Vatican Missionary Exposition," provides a fascinating view of objects not typically seen as art. The chapter examines dioramas within VME exhibitions that were aimed at young audiences and games marketed to children at the gift shop, which Bell argues contributed to the goal of celebrating "missionaries as heroes" (94). Before delving into a visual analysis of board games, Bell reflects on her visit to the *Societas Verbi Divini*, which is where she encountered the papers of Father Wilhelm Schmidt, who curated the VME. Bell notes that his papers include no mention of Indigenous cultural belongings from North America (92). The discussion of gaps in the written record also foreshadows the next chapter's emphasis on the material record as evidence for understanding Indigenous experiences.

Chapter 4, "Eternal Sovereigns and Ancestral Art: Ancient Archives, Relatives, and Travelers at the Vatican Missionary Exposition," begins with Bell's experience at Rome's Propaganda Fide College library, where Indigenous language dictionaries are housed among many VME materials and other documents. She reflects on how Pablo Tac studied at the same college nearly two centuries earlier (127). He was a young man from the Luiseño (Payomkâwichum) community of what is now Oceanside, California, who was pursuing the priesthood in Rome in the 1830s until his untimely death. Bell finds inspiration in researching in the place where other Indigenous Peoples like Tac had before her (128).

Bell's interventions in the archive is also evident in her illustrations. In her analysis of a statue of Father J. Marquette, a Jesuit missionary who worked in Michigan and Illinois in the seventeenth century, Bell includes an image that she altered with her own writing as part of her attempt to obscure "the lens on Marquette" and privilege Indigenous artworks instead (128, pl. 10). In the plate titled *Marquette move out the way*, the author superimposed a photo of Marquette's sculpture with pink lettering that reads "Hall of the Americas, Lakota, Yupik, Haudenosaunee, Anishnaabeg, Cree, Apache, Sac and Fox, Textiles, Baskets, Octopus Bags, Belongings, Ancestors, Move out of the Way, Overflowing Cases." Bell lists the names of the Native communities whose belongings were overshadowed by the statue of Marquette that occupied a central position within the Hall of North America at the VME; her illustration draws our attention away from the glorification of missionary efforts and toward the belongings that contain Indigenous knowledge.

Centering belongings as sources of information is the strength of Indigenous art history, which Bell successfully demonstrates through her analysis of a wampum belt, a Passamaquoddy birch cross, a Lakota Sun Dance drawing, a pair of Cree moccasins, and a Kwakwaka'wakw ancestral sun mask. In her discussion of the belt, Bell describes its materials and construction, underscoring the importance of materiality and process to Indigenous practices that venues like the VME overlooked. Bell acknowledges previous studies of the belt but notes that they do not recognize the cultural significance that wampum belts still hold for Indigenous communities (133). Bell addresses the Vatican's refusal to repatriate the wampum belt, calling it a "prisoner of the Vatican Museums" that "should be rematriated" (135). Bell's use of the term "rematriate" is another instance of her engagement with Indigenous studies, which employs the term to account for women-led efforts seeking the return of Native land and belongings to Native communities and the dissemination of Indigenous knowledge to counteract colonial narratives.⁴ Bell's reading of the beadwork on the moccasins stands out because of the personal connection and insight she brings as a Métis person and beadworker, writing that "they remind me of the beadwork practices of my sisters and me, and of my Métis ancestry" (149). She sees the beadwork on the moccasins as "an ongoing archive of Indigenous experience and care for the community" (150).

Rather than ending with a formal conclusion, Bell includes an epilogue titled "Deus Ex Machina: An Indigenous Protestor at the Vatican Missionary Exposition," in which she discusses the Australian aboriginal man, Anthony Martin Fernando (Dahrug people), who protested the VME in 1925. The story about Fernando's arrest and deportation resonates with the frustration Indigenous community members continue to face today. For instance, Bell quotes Norman Yakeleya, a member of the Dene Nation of the Northwest Territories who was among the delegation that visited the Anima Mundi collection in 2022: "For God's sakes, give them [the belongings] back to our people" (158). The museum's refusal to return ancestral Indigenous belongings sustains the centuries' long legacy of ignoring and attempting to silence Indigenous voices. Maybe Bell's book will be the call that the Vatican needs to finally listen.

Yve Chavez is associate professor of art history in the School of Visual Arts at the University of Oklahoma.

Notes

¹ For similar methods of storytelling, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (W. W. Norton, 2019); and Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative (Indigenous Americas)* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

² For scholarship that engages “belongings,” see Carolyn A. Smith, “Karuk Belongings: The Roots of Home,” paper presented at *Belonging: Native American Art in Settler Contexts Symposium*, Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West, University of Oklahoma, Norman, March 7, 2025; Carolyn A. Smith, “Weaving pikyav (to-fix-it): Karuk Basket Weaving in-Relation-with the Everyday World” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2016), 2, 8–13, 28–37; Reece Muntean, Kate Hennessy, Alissa Antle, Susan Rowley, et al., “ʔeləw’k’w—Belongings: A Tangible Interface for Intangible Cultural Heritage,” *Electronic Visualisation and the Arts (EVA)*, London, July 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14236/ewic/eva2015.41>.

³ Dian Million, “Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 54.

⁴ Rematriation is discussed in Olivia Chilcote, “Rematriating the Visual: Nineteenth-Century Photographs of Payómkawichum Matriarchs at the San Luis Rey Village,” paper presented at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Annual Conference, Oklahoma City, June 26, 2025; Holly Miowak Guise, “Who Is Doctor Bauer?: Rematriating a Censored Story on Internment, Wardship, and Sexual Violence in Wartime Alaska, 1941–1944,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2022): 145–65; Robin R. R. Gray, “Rematriation: Ts-msyen Law, Rights of Relationality, and Protocols of Return,” *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 9, no. 1 (2022): 1–27; and Eve Tuck, “Rematriating Curriculum Studies,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 8 (2011): 34–37.