

(Free pdf) Oaks Park Pentimento: Portland's Lost and Found Carousel Art

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Jim Lommasson, Inara Verzemnieks, Prudence Roberts
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Jim Lommasson, Inara Verzemnieks, Prudence Roberts : Oaks Park Pentimento: Portland's Lost and Found Carousel Art before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Oaks Park Pentimento: Portland's Lost and Found Carousel Art:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. An excellent book on art, culture, and Portland history By Alexander Craghead The transitory nature of art has always been fascinating. Photographs can fade, negatives can stiffen and crack and slides can succumb to color shifts and mildew. Sculptures fair little better; it has been suggested that the features on the statues of St. Mark's Square in Venice have softened over the years, eroding away from acidic rainfall. And paintings? Even in the care of the greatest museums, many of the masters of the Renaissance onwards have developed crackled surfaces. The resulting revealed lower layers of paint are known as pentimento, but they are not confined to great canvases in the museum halls of Europe. In Oaks Park Pentimento: Portland's Lost and Found Carousel Art, photographer Jim Lommasson explores an example of this effect on a Portland landmark, the carousel at the Oaks Park amusement park. The results, far from trivial, create a fascinating juxtaposition of Edwardian and Mid-Century cultures, as well as provide a unique encapsulation of the temporal nature of the arts. Lommasson's book is almost the result of an accident. During an assignment from a photography class in 1970, the photographer noted that the paintings on the central pillar of the carousel at the Oaks were peeling away, the victim of age, exposure to elements, and occasional flood waters. Lommasson only shot a single frame in black-and-white, but he returned to the Oaks over a decade later and recorded all the central panels, this time in color. It was a prescient decision: a few short years later, the panels were "restored" to their scenes of northwest scenery by a local painting club, covering over the Edwardian imagery that had been bleeding through in the pentimento. The slim volume opens up with an introduction by journalist Inara Verzemnieks, who writes lyrically about the nature of time and art. She describes the roots of the park as a competitor to the Lewis Clark Exposition of 1905, a place of excitement and perhaps moral danger, where

young women would cozy up to young men in the darkness and be frowned upon by the local clergy for so doing. The original paintings on the carousel mimic this somewhat naive sense of adventure, with Arabian sheiks on camels, befeathered Indian chiefs, and beautiful women exhibiting a range of behaviors from stately and elegant (strolling under a parasol) to scandalous (can-can- dancing). By the 1940s, such images were dated and old fashioned, and the park had them covered over with scenic vistas of the Columbia Gorge and other northwest scenes, all far more family friendly and far more in keeping with the highway-centric provincial boosterism notions of the era. Yet, as the surface images degraded, they began to merge with the lower layers, almost as if they were interacting with each other, a process that Verzemnieks relates in a haunting way. Following the excellent introduction, Lommasson provides a short text describing how and why he shot the images of the carousel's central riding panels, and then come the 18 large color plates. The most striking image is perhaps that of the woman with a parasol, with the Columbia Gorge Highway circling about her legs leading to the Vista House located rather provocatively between her thighs. It is such a strange image, almost like an intentional double-exposure on film, and yet, there was no artist for these images. Yes, there were the artists who painted the original panel of the woman, and also two later artists -- the eccentric Chase brothers -- who painted the scene of the highway and river. But who painted this image, this amalgamation? Time, nature, God? No human hand with intent created this image. For that matter, is the art in question here the painted panels themselves, or Lommasson's photographs? Who is the artist, and what is the art? The lines all blur here in ways that are similar to graffiti art. Everything about the panels is provocative. The book wraps up with an afterword by art historian Prudence Roberts. Roberts tells the story of the panels, from their creation by anonymous immigrant artists at the carousel factor in 1912 to their repainting by off-beat brothers Waldo Spore and William Corbin Chase. The Chases were painters and wood-block printers, part of the larger arts-and-crafts movement. They were also highly unconventional, living for a time in a teepee in the woods of Western Washington State. The text is accompanied by images of the park and works of the talented Chase brothers. Overall, the book succeeds in placing the carousel panels in a much larger context of art and regional culture. The texts are rich, and the images largely thought provoking. If I had any critical comments, it would be that there is not enough. I would have welcomed more information on the chases, as well as on the original anonymous painters who created the Edwardian imagery. Then again, in the words of circus promoter P. T. Barnum, who would no doubt have felt at home at a place like the Oaks, "always leave them wanting more." The book is the typically shelf-awkward size that photography and art books assume, and it also feels rather slim. This makes it seem, at first glance, a bit pricey for its size. Although time spent pouring over the work ought to dismiss those concerns, it does remain slim enough that it just doesn't feel good to hold in your lap and flip through. I always felt like the book was awkward and wanting to slip from my hands or lose its dust jacket. It is far easier to view set on a table top, and while that's probably the recommended way to view any book of art or photography, I really like to relax in a nice chair with my books, and with *Pentimento* you just can't do that. The images themselves are all crisp and the entire book is printed on a thick, high quality paper with a satin sheen to it. *Pentimento* is a volume that explores history, artistic philosophy, and Pacific Northwest culture through a unique lens. It is far more than a book about an amusement park ride. It should prove valuable to those interested in the esoterica of Portland history, as well as those with a passion for documentary photography and painting in general.

Oaks Park *Pentimento* records the blurring of past and present, a moment when two generations of paintings collided to create remarkable new images. Over two days in 1982, Jim Lommasson photographed the strange and beautiful paintings that decorated the center column of the historic carousel at Oaks Amusement Park in Portland, Oregon. The original carousel images were an exotic assortment of Edwardian pastoral scenes: western explorers, Native Americans, Arabs, idealized women painted by anonymous German and Italian immigrants in the 1920s. In 1944, two itinerant painters, brothers from Vashon Island, Washington, painted over the eighteen panels. Their paintings featured Oregon landmarks from the coast to the Columbia River Highway and from Mount Hood to Multnomah Falls. After years of wear, the new images began to flake and fade away, revealing parts of the original imagery in strange and unusual ways. The double exposures or *pentimentos* include a ghostly sailboat gliding through a forest, an Indian chief looming over the Columbia River Gorge, and a parasoled woman with the road to Crown Point emerging from her loins. Each new image created a completely accidental, even surreal, story about the juxtaposition of two generations of paintings. Just three years after Jim Lommasson captured these images on film, the original paintings were restored and the mysterious double exposures disappeared. *Oaks Park Pentimento* preserves Lommasson's haunting photographs and also includes an appreciation by art historian Prudence Roberts and a look at Oaks Park, past and present, by Oregonian reporter Inara Verzemnieks. Native Oregonians who grew up visiting Oaks Park, newcomers interested in the city's quirky, offbeat culture and history, readers interested in folk art and art photography, and carousel and amusement park buffs alike will enjoy these remarkable photographs.

About the Author Jim Lommasson is the recipient of the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize from The Center of Documentary Studies at Duke University and author of the critically acclaimed book *Shadow Boxers: Sweat, Sacrifice, and the Will to Survive in American Boxing Gyms*. An exhibit of his Oaks Park photographs was held at the

Portland Art Museum in 2007. He is currently working on a book about the lives of American soldiers after their return from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. A recipient of regional and national awards with work in numerous collections, he lives in Portland, Oregon. Inara Verzemnieks has been a staff writer since 1997 at The Oregonian, where she works for the papers arts and culture department, writing stories that explore overlooked aspects of the city's creative life. In 2007, she was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing. Prudence Roberts is an art historian and curator specializing in Pacific Northwest art. She is the former curator of American art at the Portland Art Museum. She lives in Portland, Oregon, just a few miles from Oaks Park.