

AMERICAN INDIAN PAINTING

Twentieth-Century Masters

DURING THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES, Plains Indian men recorded their martial accomplishments and spiritual encounters on their clothing and robes and on tipi exteriors. As Europeans and Americans began crossing the Plains, they brought with them paper and pencils, and these new mediums were soon utilized by Native artists. The lined accounting books used by traders and the military provided an abundant source of drawing paper and early Plains Indian works of art on paper are referred to as “ledger art.” The ledger art tradition declined after the 1880s as sedentary reservation life became the norm and there was no longer a need for men to record their battle exploits and hunting successes.

The work of the Kiowa artist Silver Horn (Haungooah; 1860–1940) is a major link in the artistic chain that connected the nineteenth-century Plains pictographic tradition to the Plains painting tradition of the twentieth-century. Silver Horn’s father was a keeper of one of the Kiowa pictorial calendars. His older brother Ohettoint (1852–1934) also made and sold ledger-style art while imprisoned at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, during the 1870s.

Besides inspiring his own children to produce creative work in a variety of mediums, Silver Horn also influenced the Kiowa artists who began working with Oscar Brousse Jacobson (1882–1966) at the University of Oklahoma during the late 1920s. He was the grand-uncle of Stephen Mopope (1898–1974), and Mopope and James Auchiah (1906–1974) both acknowledged him as their first teacher. Spencer Asah (1906–1954) was also a relative and Jack Hokeah (1902–1969) was a frequent visitor to his home.

The work of the Kiowa Six artists represents a watershed in twentieth-century American Indian art. In about 1914, Mopope, Hokeah, Asah and Auchiah began receiving art instruction at the St. Patrick’s Mission School in Anadarko, Oklahoma. Several years later, they took part in a fine arts class that was organized under the auspices of the Kiowa Agency. Then, with two others—Monroe Tsatoke (1904–1937) and Lois (Bougetah) Smoky (1907–1981)—they enrolled in art classes at the University of Oklahoma. Smoky’s tenure in the program was short-lived, however.

The Director of the University’s School of Art, Jacobson, organized an exhibition of Kiowa work that traveled widely beginning in 1928. The display was featured at the International Folk Art Congress in Prague and a print portfolio of the exhibited works, titled *Kiowa Indian Art*, was published in Paris in 1929. The five men continued working as artists for the remainder of their lives. In a 1975 interview, Creek artist Fred



Stephen Mopope (Kiowa, 1898–1974), *Young Mother*, 1929, watercolor on paper, 9¼" x 5½"



Monroe Tsatoke (Kiowa, 1904–1937), *Belo Cozad*, undated, watercolor on paper, 11" x 8"



Allan C. Houser (Chiricahua Apache, 1914–1994), *Buffalo Hunt*, 1952, gouache on illustration board, 17¼" x 26½"

Beaver (1911–1980) commented on the education and legacy of the Kiowa Six painters and the fact that they were largely self-taught: "The way we paint, that came from us. Just like I taught myself to paint; so did Mopope and Tsatoke and all those Kiowa boys. . . . I saw those Kiowas and I knew Dr. Jacobson pretty well . . . I know that Miss Peters pretty much let them do what they wanted to do. Their art was their own, all the way."

Works of art on paper by Southwest Indian artists had appeared prior to 1900, especially among Native artists working with anthropologists. After 1910, Edgar Lee Hewett (1865–1946) encouraged the work of artists who were part of what is now called the San Ildefonso Watercolor Movement. He arranged for the Pueblo men who were working for him in excavations in Frijoles Canyon (near present-day Los Alamos) to receive art supplies and he also commissioned paintings from them. The resultant works usually showed ceremonial scenes or other Pueblo activities. Artists linked with the movement included its "founder," Crescencio Martinez (1879–1918), his nephew, Awa Tsireh (Alfonso Roybal; 1898–1955), and Julian Martinez (1879–1943; husband of the famous potter, Maria). Hewett also encouraged the talents of Tonita Peña (Quah Ah; 1893–1945), who was the only woman associated with the early watercolorists.

In about 1915, Hopi artist Fred Kabotie (c. 1900–1986) was forced to leave Second Mesa in Arizona and attend the Santa Fe Indian School. Several years later, the school's new superintendent, John DeHuff (1872–1945), allowed his wife, Elizabeth (1892–1983), to begin teaching painting to students. The classes also included well-known artists Otis Polelonema (Hopi; 1902–1981) and Velino Shije Herrera (Zia; 1902–1973).

When talking about his earliest work, Kabotie said, "When you're so remote from your own people, you get lonesome. You don't paint what's around you, you paint what you have in mind. Loneliness moves you to express something of your home, your background." He also said, "'I had been away [from Hopi] so long then that I was yearning . . . getting lonesome for my Hopi way, and I started painting *katsinas*, because I missed them. . . ." Despite these innocent sentiments, controversy erupted around the DeHuffs' art classes and critics alleged that the sessions encouraged paganism, the recollection of traditional stories and the recording of Native religious activity. As a result, John DeHuff was eventually demoted and forced to leave the Indian School.

Attitudes eventually changed and when a painting studio was founded at the Santa Fe Indian School in 1932, it marked a major milestone in the development of twentieth-century American Indian art. Santa Fe students were encouraged to paint subjects with



Harrison Begay (Navajo, 1917–2012), *Navajo Maidens*, c. 1970, watercolor on paper, 14" x 10"



Archie Blackowl (Southern Cheyenne, 1911–1992), *Love Call*, c. 1970, tempera on mat board, 19½" x 14½"

which they were familiar and to find visual inspiration in traditions such as ledger drawings, pottery designs, and rock art. They were also instructed to avoid the influence of non-Native artistic expression. The Studio's Pueblo students used dancers and dances as their primary subject matter. In contrast, Navajo painters chose pastoral landscapes, animal subjects, and genre scenes for their compositions. Equestrian subjects were also common.

The Studio ultimately provided a training ground for nearly thirty painters whose work defined public perceptions of Native American art for more than half a century. Of this number, four Navajo artists—Harrison Begay (1917–2012), Gerald Nailor (1917–1952), Quincy Tahoma (1920–1956), and Andrew Van Tsihnaahjinnie (1916–2000)—are said to have painted and sold more pictures than all of the other Studio alumni combined.

The success of the Kiowa Six and Santa Fe Studio artists made Plains and Southwestern Indian subjects popular with aficionados of twentieth-century Indian painting. During the second half of the



Fred Beaver (Creek/Seminole, 1911–1980), *Seminole Cook*, 1971, gouache on board, 9" x 11"

twentieth-century, however, many eastern Oklahoma artists chose not to paint what had become stereotypical imagery. They instead turned to their own traditions and painted modern and historic scenes of Southeastern Indian life. Some of these artists attended Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma—a Baptist-run institution that took a progressive role in Indian education. Prior to 1970, Bacone's Art Department was directed variously by artists Acee Blue Eagle (Creek; 1907–1959), Woody Crumbo (Potawatomi; 1912–1989) and W. Richard West, Sr. (Southern Cheyenne; 1912–1996). Importantly, West said in 1955 that "the Indian artist must be allowed to absorb influences outside of his own art forms and develop them in his own manner."

At both the University of Oklahoma and the Santa Fe Indian School, romantically inclined educators had encouraged young Indian artists to find and preserve the primitive and the unspoiled, and to remain untaught. They encouraged their students to produce works that they believed looked uniquely "Indian." Lakota artist Oscar Howe (1915–1983) responded to this regimen in 1958, when he wrote, "There is much more to Indian Art, than pretty, stylized pictures . . . Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, with no right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian always has been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for him?"

Several factors soon encouraged Native artists to create personal, expressive and socially meaningful art. The conservative proponents of Indian painting ultimately recognized that the style of art they



Patrick Desjarlait, (Chippewa, 1921–1973), *The Catch*, 1970, tempera on paper, 19¾" x 25"



Joe Hilario Herrera (Cochiti Pueblo, 1923–2001), *Eagles and Rabbit (Symbols Used on Altars)*, c. 1950, paint on board, 15¼" x 13"



Anthony Edward "Tony" Da (San Ildefonso Pueblo, 1940–2008), *Symbols of the Southwest*, 1970, tempera on paper, 19½" x 14¾"

were promoting had become sterile. The civil rights movement also gave rise to a generation of politically active Indian young people who found social commentary to be a necessary expression. Too, the Southwest Indian Art Project—sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation—was held at the University of Arizona in Tucson during the summers of 1960 and 1961. This led to the founding of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in 1962. The Institute and its celebrated instructors—Fritz Scholder (Luiseño; 1937–2005), Allen Houser (Chiricahua Apache; 1914–1994) and Charles Loloma (Hopi; 1921–1991) among them—taught that the form and content of Indian art could embrace the ideas and techniques in use in the mainstream art community.

A new generation of painters brought rapid change and in 1971, in his *Indian Painters and White Patrons*, J.J. Brody observed that "easel painting was a White art medium; it was given to the Indians, and the result for fifty years was meek acceptance. Now the Indians have taken it . . . The taking has resulted in a vital, expressive, sometimes un-pretty, sometimes polemical, and always stylistically varied art. The forms may be quite un-Indian but they merely reflect radical changes in the purpose of Indian art."

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All of the pictured works are from the Arthur and Shifra Silberman Collection, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

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