

PUEBLO ARTIST MARIA MARTINEZ DISPLAYS SOME OF HER CREATIONS AT THE VILLAGE OF SAN ILDEFONSO NEAR SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO. HER OUTSTANDING WORK WON HER RECOGNITION AS THE NATION'S FOREMOST CERAMICIST.



The New Deal era of the 1930s was a time of major change in the development of Native American art. With Franklin Roosevelt in the White House and John Collier at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, official attitudes toward Indian artists and their work shifted dramatically. In 1933 federal officials for the first time sanctioned the painting of traditional Indian subjects in government schools, and two years later Congress created the Indian Arts and Crafts Board to assist in the production and marketing of Indian works. Also in 1935 one of the nation's first college-level Native American art programs was established at Bacone Junior College in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Under the direction of founder Acee Blue Eagle (Creek/Pawnee) and his successors Woodrow Wilson Crumbo (Creek/Potawatomi) and W. Richard West (Cheyenne), students at Bacone were taught to incorporate complex design elements in paintings that “romanced” the past and presented the mythology of the Plains cultures with a sense of drama and

mystery. The Bacone faculty emphasized the importance of firsthand knowledge of tribal traditions and customs. “There will always be Indian art because of the color of skin,” W. Richard West observed. “But without exposure to the old culture, it’s like a non-Indian trying to paint Indian.”

Another milestone in the history of Native American art was the founding of The Studio at the Santa Fe Indian School in 1932 by artist and educator Dorothy Dunn. Attracting students from tribes throughout the country, The Studio became the premier training ground for an entire generation of Indian artists. Dunn encouraged her students to draw inspiration from the traditional ceremonies and daily life of their people, emphasizing particular animal and plant forms as the basic ingredients of Indian art. She taught her students to paint in a flat, two-dimensional style, with figures rendered in opaque colors and even contours. This so-called Studio style was soon adopted by instructors elsewhere, defining the acceptable canon of Indian art for the next several decades.

One of the finest practitioners of the Studio style was Fred Kabotie (Hopi) whose paintings depicted tribal dancers and other figures “floating” in the picture plane, lacking either foreground or background. Kabotie’s works brought Indian painting into a golden age of appreciation and respect in the late 1930s and 1940s. Another of the most successful Studio painters was Harrison Begay (Navajo), whose works often depict tribal scenes with compassion and a delicate humor. His stylized figures are painted with flat areas filled with radiant colors, appearing more as collections of generic types than individual portraits. Pablita Velarde (Santa Clara Pueblo) mastered the Studio style while studying with Dorothy Dunn in the 1930s. Among her most renowned paintings are a series of murals containing composite images of the daily life and culture of the Rio Grande Pueblos. Dozens of other artists, with varying degrees of skill, produced hundreds of paintings and drawings in the easily recognizable style of The Studio.

In the years after World War II, Native American artists became increasingly restive within the narrow limits of what was acceptable as Indian art. Wealthy patrons, government agencies, and private galleries had come to prefer art produced in the Studio style almost to the exclusion of any other forms of Native American expression. Many Indian artists complained that those who were painting in the accepted style were becoming imitative and repetitive; they challenged their fellow artists to break new ground and regain the dynamism of

experimentation that is essential for great art. Bob Haozous (Chiricahua Apache), an outspoken Native American critic and sculptor, denounced contemporary Indian art as:

A bundle of safe, decorative ideas and motifs that have been repeated so doggedly they have lost all ability to communicate or awaken our aesthetic senses. It's become a prop for the interior decorator. It is a safe niche. It is a place where Indians can hide when they do not want to compete with the great artists of the non-Indian world.

Two of the first postwar artists to challenge the canon of Studio art were Joe Herrera (Cochiti Pueblo) and Oscar Howe (Yanktonai Sioux). Both Herrera and Howe had received formal training at The Studio, and their early works reflect the influence of Dorothy Dunn and her successors. By the mid-twentieth century, however, both artists had become convinced that a synthesis of European-American modernism and Indian traditionalism was not only possible but also necessary. A critical juncture in Herrera's career came in the early 1950s when he studied with modernist Raymond Jonson at the University of New Mexico and was introduced to the cubism of Picasso, the abstract expressionism of Kandinsky, and the primitivism of Paul Klee. "We were taught at the Santa Fe Indian School what traditional Indian art was supposed to be," Herrera later recalled, "but Jonson exposed me to world art." Jonson also encouraged Herrera to study Anasazi rock art, traditional kiva murals, and Pueblo pottery and textile designs. From these varied influences, Herrera developed his own style of "Pueblo modernism" where images from ancient petroglyphs and other traditional sources were integrated in paintings that were highly abstract. As Rennard Strickland and Margaret Archuleta, authors of *Shared Visions: Native American Painting and Sculpture in the Twentieth Century* (1991), observed, Herrera's work is especially interesting because it illustrates so well the cross-fertilization of modern art: Primitivists like Klee and modernists like Jonson (who influenced Herrera) had themselves been influenced by so-called aboriginal art.

Oscar Howe also chose the difficult path of trying to fuse elements of traditional Indian culture with the techniques of modern art. "My reason for painting is to record visually and artistically the culture of the American Indian, particularly the Dakota Indian," he once explained. Howe was convinced that cubism and surrealism were the best means of recording the complexity and mystery of that culture. Thus, his paintings bear such titles as *Medicine Man*, *Head Dancers*,

and *War Dancer*, yet in appearance they are abstract compositions of intersecting lines and bold planes of color. Like the work of Joe Herrera, Howe's paintings are examples of what critics have called "double cross-pollination." Viewing one of Howe's paintings "is like peering into a series of mirrors where modernism reflects primitivism which reflects modernism and on and on."

Both Herrera and Howe encountered stiff resistance from those who criticized their works as "non-Indian." In 1959 one of Howe's cubist paintings was rejected from an exhibition of Native American works because of its "non-traditional Indian style." He responded with an eloquent statement in defense of the freedom of the Indian artist:

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? Now, even in Art, "You little child do what we think is best for you, nothing different." Well, I am not going to stand for it. Indian Art can compete with any Art in the world, but not as a suppressed Art.

Reminding his critics that Indian art has always been evolving and adapting, Herrera concluded that "Whoever said that my paintings are not in the traditional Indian style has poor knowledge of Indian art indeed."

The discontent among avant-garde Native American artists was fully expressed at a conference on "Directions in Indian Art," sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1959 at the University of Arizona. Artists, educators, administrators, and traders gathered to discuss ways to expand the definition of Indian art and to devise new strategies for marketing it. From the conference emerged a consensus that the current standards of acceptable Indian art were based on an arbitrary ideal, and a break with those standards was essential if Indian art was to remain vital. "The future of Indian art lies in the future, not the past," proclaimed one conferee. "Let's stop looking backward for our standards of Indian art production." Yet the conference also acknowledged the dilemma of promoting further innovation by Native American artists while maintaining a sense of tradition: Innovation without tradition might render Indian art indistinguishable from that produced by non-Indians, yet tradition without innovation yielded art that was stereotyped and trivialized by endless repetitions.

The Rockefeller Foundation conference led directly to the establishment of the University of Arizona's Southwest Indian Art Project,