

The works of two California-born Native American artists reveal further the varied currents and possibilities within modernism. Frank LaPena (Wintu/Nontipom), born in San Francisco in 1937, produced abstract paintings of flowing lines and dynamic colors that are rooted in the mystical traditions of Indian life and art. His *Deer Rattle-Deer Dancer* (1981) evokes a mystical apparition of a ghostlike skull with eyes that are empty yet piercing; its skull-crested dancer has been described as "one of the strongest figures evoked in a modern Indian painting." The beaming and red-capped figure in *Earth Mother* (1990) illustrates LaPena's conviction that "art and life are reflections of the spirit."

A nascent spirituality also is present in the works of mixed-blood artist Harry Fonseca (Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian). Born in Sacramento in 1946, Fonseca was influenced by styles as diverse as funk art, pop art, and traditional Indian painting. His *Coyote* series, including such paintings as *When Coyote Leaves the Res* (1980) and *Coyote in the Mission* (1989), are variations on a single theme: the traditional trickster figure of Indian mythology transported to strange new times and places. "I believe my *Coyote* paintings to be the most contemporary statement I have painted in regard to traditional belief and contemporary reality," Fonseca observed. "I have taken a universal Indian image, Coyote, and have placed him in a contemporary setting." In the late 1980s and 1990s, Fonseca produced a series called *Stone Poems* in which designs from ancient petroglyphs form the basis for abstract compositions. Like other Indian modernists, Fonseca saw his works bridging two worlds: "In the *Stone Poems* I am using Native American rock art images to make new paintings, not historical or traditional pieces."

Among the Native American practitioners of the plastic arts were several notable modernists who also combined innovation and tradition to produce works of remarkable beauty. Tony Da (Pueblo), the grandson of ceramist Maria Martinez, continued the family tradition of making fine pottery. His ceramic sculptures during the late 1970s and 1980s became steadily more abstract in design and were the first to incorporate the use of turquoise and inlaid patterns. Tony Da credited the works of Sioux artist Oscar Howe with first introducing him to the realm of abstract art. "I find abstraction particularly challenging," Da explained, "because of its infinite possibilities." Ben Nighthorse Campbell (Northern Cheyenne) was likewise inspired to develop his own unique style of jewelry by the innovative designs of

Hopi jeweler Charles Loloma. Using modern inlaying and laminating techniques to combine gold, silver, copper, and brass, Campbell decorated rings, bracelets, and belts with patterns taken from the ancient ceremonial art of sandpainting. "I believe it is the first really new style of Indian jewelry in more than two decades," he said in 1988. (Campbell also was an innovator in politics. After serving terms in the Colorado state legislature and the House of Representatives, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1992, the first Native American to serve in that chamber in sixty years.)

Following the classification scheme of art historians Wade and Strickland, the individualists among contemporary Native American artists were the most innovative of all. Because their works were so thoroughly integrated into the mainstream of twentieth-century art, some critics complained that the individualists had abandoned altogether their "Indian roots" in favor of absolute artistic freedom. Yet even here there are suggestions of traditional sources and values. James Havid (Choctaw/Chippewa) earned an international reputation in a style known as abstract illusionism, seemingly distant from the world of traditional Indian art. His canvases rendered abstract designs as three-dimensional realities, bits of acrylic scribbles appearing suspended above the plane of the canvas. But close observers of his work also detected "directional arrows and graffiti-style screws . . . reminiscent of New Mexico sandpaintings" and "zig-zag patterned bars curved to resemble 'medicine sticks.'" The works of individualist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (*Cree/Shoshone*) are equally as abstract and offer more substantial hints of the artist's Indian identity. Influenced by such modernists as Miro and Klee, she also acknowledged "a commitment to address her heritage as a Native American" and adamantly defended herself against critics who said her works were "not Indian enough." Smith described herself as a "bridge builder" between two worlds.

The quintessential Native American individualist was George Morrison (Chippewa), an abstract expressionist whose paintings appeared to be totally unconnected to his Indian heritage. The sweeping, rhythmic pattern of lines in works like *New York* (1961) closely resemble the "drippings" of Jackson Pollock, while *The White Painting* (1971) employs the technique of pointillism to create the illusion of an all-white surface. Morrison was praised by one critic for having achieved "the most outstanding record of any Indian painter in the fine arts field." In recognition of his achievement, he was the first Native artist

to be appointed to the faculty of a major art school, the Rhode Island School of Design. Echoing the sentiments of Fritz Scholder and R. C. Gorman, Morrison thought of himself as an “artist who is an Indian” rather than an “Indian artist.” Yet, when asked to describe the Indian-ness in his art, Morrison was quick to respond:

Certain Indian values are inherent—an inner connection with the people and all living things, a sense of being in tune with natural phenomena, a consciousness of sea and sky, space and light, the enigmas of the horizon, the color of the wind. I’ve never tried to prove my Indian-ness through my art. And yet there remains deep within some remote suggestion of the earth and the rock from which I come.

One of the most promising of the new generation of Native American artists was T. C. Cannon (Caddo/Kiowa), born in 1946 in Lawton, Oklahoma. After studying with Fritz Scholder at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Cannon had numerous solo exhibitions around the country before his early tragic death in an automobile accident in 1978. His works demonstrate a keen consciousness of such major figures in twentieth-century American art as Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Wayne Thiebaud, and Richard Diebenkorn, yet they also draw heavily upon the artist’s Indian heritage. One of his earliest works is a portrait done while a student at IALA in the mid-1960s; like many other student works from the period, the facial features in the portrait are blurred and fragmentary.

Cannon’s *Mama and Papa Have the Going Home to Shiprock Blues* (1966) portrays an elderly Navajo couple in traditional dress but also lacking facial features. The faceless heads and multiple images in the work suggest that the artist (or Mama and Papa, or Indians in general) may have difficulty focusing on a single identity. The couple are border-town residents, caught between two cultures. Commenting on this powerful work, Patricia Janis Broder observed:

Cannon has utilized techniques of abstract expressionism and pop art in order to express on both emotional and intellectual levels the paradoxical lives of [a people] suspended between two worlds. For the Indian artist living in modern America, life has many of the characteristics of a border-town. The artist is constantly called on to justify his personal identity and his role as an artist in both the Indian and non-Indian world.

The best-known and most provocative of Cannon’s paintings is *Osage with Van Gogh* (1975), in which an Indian in traditional cloth-

ing (bear-claw necklace, beadwork, moccasins) is seated in a fashionable wicker chair on a Navajo rug (see the cover of this book). The Indian art collector stares with narrowed eyes at the viewer, while on the wall in the background is a reproduction of Van Gogh’s *Wheatfield*. The painting works on several levels, combining a pop art sensibility with the basic elements of traditional Indian arts and crafts. It also juxtaposes the world of European fine art and portraiture with the lost world of Plains cultures before the arrival of the Europeans. To appreciate fully the parody that Cannon intends, the viewer must be familiar with several art-historical allusions in the work as well as the stock features of late-nineteenth-century photographs of Native Americans stiffly posed in front of Victorian backdrops.

T. C. Cannon was an artist of considerable vision and insight. Like his mentor Fritz Scholder, Cannon believed that contemporary Native Americans must confront and refute the stereotypes that have reduced the Indian in American popular culture to the status of a well-worn cliché. “The mass media have forced so many fantasies and fortunes on us that our art must counteract—act—and superimpose this influence,” wrote Cannon in an exhibition catalogue in 1971. Carrying on the tradition that began (at least) with Joe Herrera and Oscar Howe, Cannon was determined to broaden the range of acceptable Indian art. “I dream of a great breadth of Indian art to develop that ranges through the whole region of our past, present and future.” This generosity of spirit calls to mind the communal approach to artistic creation that had characterized Native American art for countless generations. “Art is big and there’s room for everybody. I used to argue the old argument about the traditional painters and the modern painters. . . . I don’t think that kind of debate makes any sense anymore. There’s room for every kind of painter.”

SOURCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Much of the material on the revival of Native American cultures is drawn from periodicals. In addition to those cited for the previous chapter, important sources include articles in *The Oregonian*, *Spokesman Review*, *Christian Century*, *Science News*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Life*.

Harvey Arden and Steve Wall, *Wisdomkeepers: Meetings with Native American Spiritual Elders* (1991) and Steve Wall, *Wisdom’s Daughters: Conversations with Women Elders of Native America* (1993) reveal the extent of Native religious practices. See also Robert A. Brightman,