

Modern Indian Painting: A Separate and Unique Soul

by Barbara Eck

A few weeks ago a professor asked our American West class to name three male Indians. We immediately thought of Tonto, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Geronimo. He then asked us to write down words that are commonly used to describe Indians. We listed words such as "savage," "redskin," "crafty," and "demonic." To a great extent, our response represented what most people know about Indians—that they are either scalp-hungry animals or noble savages. Moreover, our response had a firm historical basis. The first discoverers of America assured themselves that Indians were not human at all; and at the beginning of the fifteenth century, church officials gravely discussed whether, not being descended from Adam, the Indian indeed had a soul like our own. It was a question not settled once and for all when the church answered "yes," for at the beginning of our own century, D. H. Lawrence amended that answer: "Yes, a soul, but not one precisely like our own, except as our own have the potentiality of being like his."¹ Our problem is still one of perception. We fail to see American Indians as a unique people with a unique art and culture. Even in trying to explain the mystery of the Indians' otherness, we often overlook the spirited and vigorous art which grew out of the Indians' experience. Plains Indians, in keeping with the roving culture, created a portable art which was at first recorded on the broad surfaces of the hides of buffalo and other large animals. These pictures served as an autobiographical record, for the artist combined personal exploits with an historical account.² This art has not disappeared or been assimilated into the great American "melting pot." Instead, contemporary Indian artists are reinventing traditions, tribal lore, and mythology to explain themselves to their own people as well as other cultures. I write this essay, therefore, not as an art critic or scholar, but as one still learning

1. Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers), 1968, pp. 21-22.

2. Dorothy Dunn, *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Areas* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), pp. 143-144.

about a new experience. But more importantly, I write this essay as an introduction—to open a window upon a new world where men have souls not precisely like our own.

I. He Wove the Strands of Our Life
The Flowering Tree stands in Tamoanchan:
There we were created, there he gave us being,
There he wove the strands of our life,
He who gives life to everything.
Likewise I work the gold,
Likewise I polish the jade—it is my song.
It is as if it were turquoise.
For there in Tamoanchan
He turned us round four times,
He who gives life to everything.³
Aztec .

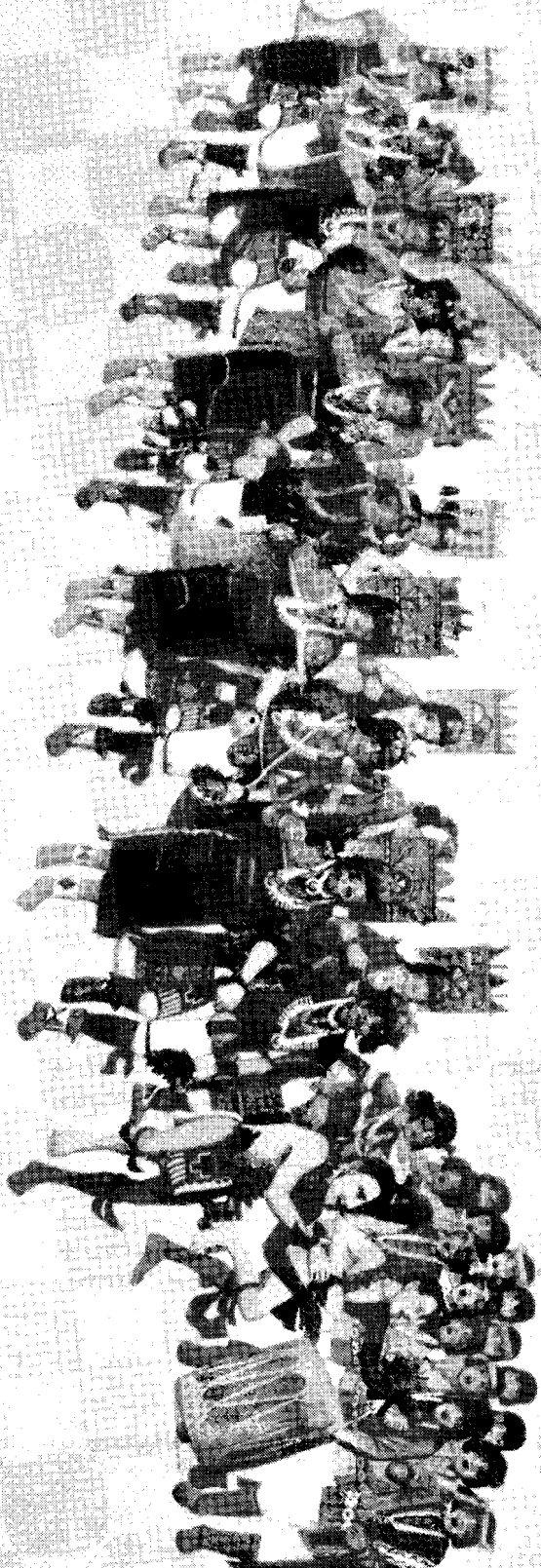
“All art is from nature and everything that lives is holy,” states Blackbear Bosin, a Kiowa-Commanche artist.⁴ This statement indicates a system of relationships through which the American Indian sees the world around him. For the Indian, both art and nature are inextricably linked to that all-embracing diety which overlooks the universe. To consider one apart from the other is like examining one fragment of an intricate web. Apart, each represents only a small segment of the complex pattern of experience that is unique to the American Indian. To this experience, the Indian artist adds himself. In the work of the primitive artist is perhaps the clearest example of the union of art, nature, man, and god. For primitive man, painting and poetry are things done precisely as a decoration on a water-jar is done. It is the abstraction of an experience sketched upon the audience with the poet’s self as tool.⁵ Through this art, the Indian understands himself, his experience, and his relationship to the universe for it joins the Indian and his earth and his sky and his unseen gods. For the Indian, art is not only a way of life, but a metaphor through which he sees his world. His pictures have a bearing upon every aspect of the Indians’ existence; birth, nourishment, rest, growth, learning, work, play, reproduction, healing, and death.⁶ Through the metaphor he creates in his paintings, the artist communicates his perception of his world, his society, and himself. Modern Indian painting, like all art and literature, reflects the large general category of human activities to which it belongs.

3. “He Wove the Strands of Our Life,” *In the Trail of the Wind*, ed. John Bierhorst (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), p. 28.

4. Blackbear Bosin, personal interview on October 4, 1975 in Wichita, Kansas.

5. Mary Austin, “Indian Poetry,” *Introduction to American Indian Art*, ed. Oliver LaFarge et al. (Clorieta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1970), p. 95.

6. Dunn, p. 29.





Historians have been slow to realize that drawings and paintings which portray the American Indian are documents as worth of serious critical study as are the writings and maps produced by explorers, traders, travelers, missionaries, soldiers, and settlers.⁷ From this information, countless volumes have been written about the Indian; but the Indian has rarely written about himself. What remains of his once flourishing oral literature is a mere structural outline. His truest record of himself lies in his art, particularly in his modern paintings. In these visual images of the Indians' world, the record lives and grows. These pictures, however, are far more than an historical record. As I wandered through Blackbear's Great Plains Studios in Wichita, I found myself amidst a world that Blackbear had created to communicate a way of life. His paintings convey a sense of a unique Plains experience—the forces of nature, the country, the people and their

7. John C. Ewers, "Fact and Fiction in the Documentary Art of the American West," *The Frontier Re-examined*, ed. John Francis McDermott (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 79.

personalities. Modern Indian painting is indeed a way of sharing beauty and a philosophy of life in form available to other men. Through his art, the Indian bridges a cultural gap, for his contemporary painting relates to both the old traditions and the new. It is at once an expression of a primitive heritage and a modern experience.⁸

II. It Was the Wind

It was the wind that gave them life. It is the wind that comes out of our mouths now that gives us life. When this ceases to blow we die. In the skin at the tips of our fingers we see the trail of the wind; it shows us where the wind blew when our ancestors were created.⁹

Navaho

The Indian artist's ability to communicate with his own people depended on his recognition of the force of tradition.¹⁰ In an interview I asked Blackbear Bosin about the significance of historical tradition and the role it plays in his painting. He explained that just as European cultures find guiding principles in Christianity, the Indian finds his totems and guidelines in mystic visions and the unseen powers of the universe. Out of these totems, Indian artists have developed an art which represents a highly spiritual and individualized vision of the world.¹¹ Plains painters, for example, evolved a representational and individualistic art from a highly totemic and fetishistic one. In the days of painting on buffalo hides, such an art was in the making—an art for demonstrating the importance of the ego as well as the importance of the group.¹² Consequently, modern Indian painting derives its life from the past. By reinventing ancient traditions, the contemporary painting portrays both a sense of primal origins and life in our times.

To be a pictorial document of historical and sociological value, a painting must not only present its subject accurately, but it must also communicate the traditions, beliefs, and feelings of a group of people. The artist must deliberately go beyond history into the realm of what Blackbear calls "prehistory." Essentially, the artist must read between the lines to project the historical past into the present. To depict an historical incident, he must first gather the necessary data. But more importantly, the artist must imaginatively guess the human emotions and problems that may have surrounded the situa-

8. Dunn, p. 367.

9. "It Was the Wind," *In the Trail of the Wind*, ed. John Bierhorst (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), p. 39.

10. Frederick J. Dockstader, *Indian Art in America* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1966), p. 17.

11. Blackbear Bosin.

12. Dunn, p. 183.



tion. Consequently, Blackbear states that very few Indian artists make visual statements about contemporary life. Although they certainly have the material to make these kinds of statements, the attitude of the people and their living sense of the past makes them unnecessary. Moreover, states Blackbear, there is no beauty in the harsh reality of contemporary life.¹³ Instead, the contemporary artist uses ancient traditions to find that spirit which may be transformed into a potent message for our times. Clearly, the ideas of beauty which arise in the Indians' consciousness move with the times, and the spiritual forces behind them are not held to the trail of the vanished buffalo.¹⁴

III. Beseaching the Breath

Beseaching the breath of the divine one,
His life-giving breath,
His breath of old age,
His breath of waters,
His breath of seeds,
His breath of riches,
His breath of fecundity,
His breath of power,
His breath of strong spirit,
His breath of all good fortune whatsoever,
Asking for his breath
And into my warm body drawing his breath,
I add to your breath
That happily you may always live.¹⁵

Zūni

Many of the individual and tribal traditions expressed in contemporary Indian painting revolve around the Indians' perception of the almighty power which pervades the universe. But the strength of this vision met a powerful and destructive force. One of the greatest crimes ever committed against the vision of the Indian people, states Blackbear, was the white man's desire to embroil them in Christianity.¹⁶ However, to Indians who have had any fair chance to remain Indians at all, their fundamental expressions of god and nature remain essentially the same as they were before the white man came. For example, the sandpainting of the Southwest is an ancient traditional art which is a direct outgrowth of religious ceremony. In fact, sandpainting is the visual embodiment of the Navaho religion, for it

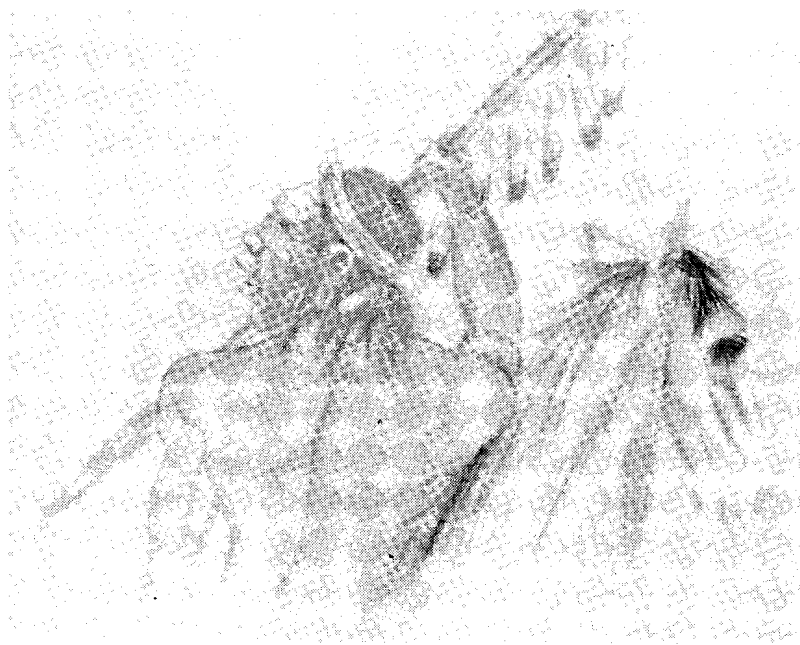
13. Blackbear Bosin.

14. Herbert J. Spinden, "Fine Art and the First Americans," *Introduction to American Indian Art*, ed. Oliver LaFarge et al. (Glorieta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1970), p. 74.

15. "Beseaching the Breath," *In the Trail of the Wind*, ed. John Bierhorst (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), p. 45.

16. Blackbear Bosin.

contains a statement of the ideas which motivate the ceremonial.¹⁷ Even though contemporary painting is independent of ritualistic ceremonies, the old spirit still animates their work and their point of view. This spirit is a part of a living culture and their work is a reflection of a philosophy that feels every object magically alive.¹⁸ The artist's job, states Blackbear, is to capture the essence of an object—to make visual its soul and the god that gives it life.¹⁹ In this light, the Indian artist does not seek primarily to portray a subject in a given place and time in a more or less representational manner; but rather to stress the fundamental qualities of the object or the power that animates it. Modern Indian art is concerned with the inner functions and meanings of things rather than the superficial appearance of nature.²⁰ Blackbear adds that this philosophy evolved from the realization that there is no way to add that one dimension that is so lacking—that of life. No man can make a tree as nature made it. The artist, therefore, expresses the idea or the significant features which embody the essence of a tree.²¹



17. Laura Adams Armer, "Sandpainting of the Navaho Indians," *Introduction to American Indian Art*, ed. Oliver LaFarge et al. (Glorieta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1970), p. 116.

18. Alice Corbin Henderson, "Modern Indian Painting," *Introduction to American Indian Art*, ed. Oliver LaFarge et al. (Glorieta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, 1970), pp. 101-104.

19. Blackbear Bosin.

20. Dunn, p. 26.

21. Blackbear Bosin.

To communicate the essence of an object, the Indian artist creates symbols. Blackbear states his personal theory that at any given time, depending on how the artist is moved by spiritual circumstances or his environment, he develops symbols.²² For the Indian, painting symbols has been an ordinary and natural occurrence.²³ The artist/symbol-maker draws a few sweeping curves for clouds. In one of Blackbear's paintings, this simple cloud-shape subtly transforms itself into a menacing herd of buffalo. For the audience, the symbol's story and its pungent message are clear. Another artist may create a figure of a man whose flesh and bones symbolically suggest his soul.

IV. That We May Walk Fittingly Where the Birds Sing

Oh, our Mother, the Earth; oh, our Father, the Sky,
Your children are we, with tired backs
We bring you the gifts that you love.
Then weave for us a garment of brightness;
May the warp be the white light of morning,
May the weft be the red light of evening,
May the fringe be the falling rain,
May the border be the standing rainbow.
Thus weave for us a garment of brightness
That we may walk fittingly where the birds sing,
That we may walk fittingly where the grass is green,
Oh, our Mother, the Earth; oh, our Father, the Sky!²⁴

Tewa

Through the use of these symbols, the Indian artist creates a metaphor through which he can view the universe, his heritage, his contemporary life, and communicate his unique experience. In her book, *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Areas*, Dorothy Dunn precisely states the power of such symbol-making:

The modern American as much as did his indigenous predecessor, needs art in his everyday life, for he needs art's insights in more fully realizing the place and order that are in the forms of nature, and in comprehending something of the elements and functions of the gigantic and minute patterns in a universe which is comparatively strange to him, with all his technology, as it was to the pre-Columbian Indian. Whereas the main function of art in primitive days was one of helping to keep man from being destroyed by nature, that of art in modern times may well be one concerned in some way with preventing nature, including man himself, from being destroyed by man.²⁵

22. Blackbear Bosin.

23. Dunn, p. 30

24. Spinden, p. 74.

25. Dunn, p. 264.

These symbols ultimately maintain a balance between the Indian and the universe he sees as eternal and unchanging, made up of physical, social, and supernatural forces. In essence, these visual symbols allow the Indian to live aright in his world. For the Indian, the good life consists of maintaining intact all the complex relationships of the universe.²⁶ The Indians' contemporary experience has added yet another dimension to the function and power of his art. Today, modern Indian painting acts as bridge between cultures. Through his modern expression, we can learn to see the Indian through a medium devoid of popular misconceptions. For the Indian, the importance of his modern painting lies in the fact that it keeps him from being destroyed by myths propagated by popular fiction and films. It makes visual and distinct his separate and unique soul.

26. Peter Farb, *Man's Rise to Civilization* (New York: Avon Books, 1968).

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