



# Evolution of Native American Art Traditional to Contemporary

University of Central Oklahoma Art Collections

Archives and Special Collections  
Max Chambers Library

Edmond, OK.  
2016

Cover Artwork, *Mahtiamé (Medicine tipi)*, Oil and Wax on Masonite,  
by Michael Elizondo Jr., 2016.

## **Special Thanks**

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## Table of Contents

Foreword .....	5
Artworks from UCO Art Collections .....	10
Guest Artists:	
Micah Wesley .....	11
Michael Elizondo Jr. ....	12
Artists from UCO Art Collections .....	13
Profiles of Artists:	
Woody Crumbo .....	16
David Williams .....	20
Jerome Tiger .....	21
T.C. Cannon .....	25
Bibliography .....	28

## Foreword

*“The experience of America’s Native People seen from the artists’ perspective offers powerful messages about cultural persistence and change. As the world moves toward the twentieth century, the artistic and cultural vision of twentieth century Native American artists can help all mankind appreciate the dual task of preserving historic values while building new traditions. These artists can help in understanding the universal challenge of responding to cultural and technological change.”*

*Margaret Archuleta & Rennard Strickland,  
October, 1991*

The Archives and Special Collections of the Max Chambers Library presents works of art from some of the most influential artists who shaped the Native American Fine Art Movement of the twentieth century, including Woody Crumbo (Creek-Potawatomi), Jerome Tiger (Creek-Seminole), David Williams (Kiowa-Tonkawa/Kiowa-Apache), and T.C. Cannon (Kiowa-Caddo). The movement and revival continue to evolve, cultivating a path for a new generation of contemporary artists of Native American heritage, such as Michael Elizondo Jr. (Southern Cheyenne/Kaw/Chumash) and Micah Wesley (Muscogee Creek/Kiowa).

The Native American Fine Art Movement was born in a rapidly changing world. In the nineteenth century, westward expansion in the United States was backed by new technologies such as railroads, the steam engine, and other machinery. There was no stopping the conquest of the frontier. Native American lands were robbed, and cultures were decimated. Rennard Strickland and Margaret Archuleta, editors of *The New Press*, stated that

during this era, the federal government was determined to ensure that “white values lived and Indian civilization died.”

The practice of collecting “curious objects” in western nations started centuries ago. It continued during the nineteenth century invasion of the west. Individuals biased towards western values and aesthetics, namely North American and European collectors and museums, acquired a number of Indian artifacts and proudly displayed them in curiosity cabinets. This reinforced the idea of cultural superiority in white society.

This trend also factored into the rising study of anthropology. This new field provided museums with justification for investing in indigenous American artifacts. “Ethnocentric bias” was institutionalized and perpetuated through the practices of prominent museums and anthropology scholars. Objects from Native American cultures were labeled “primitive.” Many items were dismissed as pagan nonsense and traditional clothing was ridiculed and prohibited from being worn by Native Americans.

The notion that indigenous cultures were vanishing gave museums and scholars a legitimate reason to record and preserve the culture of Native Americans. Native American objects were studied within the framework of natural history and the evolution of humankind. Museums and curiosity cabinets perpetuated the idea that Native American cultures and people were extinct. Public education emphasized that Native American culture ended in 1890 with the Wounded Knee massacre in South Dakota. During this act of genocide, the U.S. Seventh Cavalry killed hundreds of Lakota people, including women and children.

Stereotypical images of Native Americans depicted them as “mounted warriors in feathers and leathers.” American Indian people were represented in novels and advertisements as bloodthirsty warriors who lived a primitive way of life. New settlers were often portrayed as victims and heroes fighting to claim the new frontier. This perspective continued to be taught in American history courses during the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century.

At the same time, according to scholar Chad Barbour, Anglo-Americans projected the ideals of masculinity and heroism onto the fierce and courageous warriors of native tribes. These romanticized ideals, known as the “Noble Savage” concept, were popularized through the literature of Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand (1802), *Les Natchez* (1826), and James Fenimore Cooper (1823-41.) The “Noble Savage” ideals of masculinity and heroism were later absorbed into the identity of modern Americans through the advent of superheroes in comic books.

The Native American Fine Art Movement was born and fostered during the course of the federal government’s forced assimilation process. Led by some of the earliest Native American artists, including Carl Sweezy (Arapaho, 1881-1953) and Ernest Spybuck (Shawnee, 1883-1949), the movement began as a form of spiritual survival. The Native American Fine Art Movement played a significant role in the survival of Native American cultures and spirit. Artists of native heritage helped their people to preserve their traditional values and customs. Though Native American cultures evolved over time and their material culture changed, their fundamental values were never compromised.

During the era of political activism and social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, museums began to face criticism from native people, tribal leaders, and militant chapters of the American Indian Movement (AIM). These groups were weary of museums representing native cultures and people as inferior or extinct. The most significant protest occurred at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1973. Oglala Lakota, along with the aid of AIM, seized and occupied the town of Wounded Knee to protest the government’s failure to fulfill treaty promises. Many Native American supporters traveled to Wounded Knee to back the protest. As Americans became more aware of the longstanding issue of injustice, there was widespread sympathy for the goals of the occupation. In many ways this confrontation was similar to the current Dakota Access Pipeline dispute, which has reinvigorated discussion concerning the systematic oppression of the spirit and identity of Native Americans.

In this time of social turmoil, Native Americans also promoted the concept of Pan-Indianism, which united many tribes and created a new identity for Native

Americans. The Pan-Indian movement also emphasized the uniqueness of the individual tribes and nations. The reinvigorated spirit of indigenous peoples slowly changed their image in society. The term “Indians” began to fall out of use, replaced by “First Nations” in Canada and “Native Americans” in the United States. Museums and universities slowly emerged in support of this “cultural self-determination,” shifting the prevailing views of Native American cultures and studies.

In the twenty-first century, two-thirds of Native Americans reside in urban areas, despite the persistent stereotype that native people still live in tipis and wear traditional outfits. Native Americans have become a part of the multicultural societies in American cities, overcoming cultural adjustments, socioeconomic hindrances, and spiritual struggles. Their fight is far from over. Native American scholar Perry G. Horse argues that the attitude of “white privilege” has necessitated the perpetual process of redefining what it means to be Native American in contemporary times. This idea is evidenced by recent events. In North Dakota, Native Americans were brutally confronted by a militarized police force while peacefully protesting the Dakota Access pipeline. This stands in stark contrast to the diplomatic way in which armed protestors were dealt with during the 41 day siege of a U.S. wildlife reserve in Oregon.

Art is a reflection of society. It preserves cultural identity, and records human advancement and adaptation. The “Evolution of Native American Art” exhibition displays the ever-evolving culture and spirit of Native Americans. The exhibition also celebrates the uniqueness of individuals of native heritage. Woody Crumbo, Jerome Tiger, and TC. Cannon influenced and cultivated future generations of Native American artists, and the artwork of Michael Elizondo Jr. and Micah Wesley stands firmly on the shoulders of these masters. Furthermore, their art transcends social barriers and prejudice, capturing many aspects of modern life. In helping to construct a new cultural paradigm and identity for Native Americans, they are accomplishing “the dual task of preserving historic values while building new traditions.”



*“Cannon is saying that the modern Indian makes his own culture and his own art, drawing from all worlds.”*

*W. Jackson, 1991*

Shikoh Shiraiwa  
Edmond, OK. Nov. 2016

## Artworks

### From the Chambers Library, Archives and Special Collections

- **Woody Crumbo** 1912-89, (Pottawatomi)
  - ❖ Flute Dancer, Print
  - ❖ Spirit Horse, Original Silk Screen Print
- **Doc Tate Nevaquaya** 1932-96, (Comanche)
  - ❖ Prayer to the Buffalo, Print
- **David Williams** 1933-85, (Kiowa/Apache/Tonkawa)
  - ❖ Kiowa Fancy Dancer, Print, 1972
  - ❖ Unknown, Etching, 1974
- **Jerome Tiger** 1941-67, (Muscogee Creek-Seminole)
  - ❖ Pow Wow, Print, 1966
  - ❖ Untitled, Print, 1966
- **T.C. Cannon** 1946-78, (Kiowa/Caddo)
  - ❖ A Bomb Sweatshirt, Quill pen and ink
  - ❖ Grandmother Gestating Father, Print
- **Poteet Victory** 1947-, (Cherokee/Choctaw)
  - ❖ Unknown, Oil on Canvas, 1986

### Guest Artists

- **Micah Wesley** 1978-, (Muscogee Creek/Kiowa)
  - ❖ Fading Identity: Forgive Us Our Trespass, 2016, Acrylic on cradled Masonite
- **Michael Elizondo Jr.** 1985-, (Southern Cheyenne/Kaw/Chumash)
  - ❖ The Union, Acrylic, 2013
  - ❖ Mahtieme (Medicine tipi), Oil and Wax on Masonite, 2016

**Micah Wesley** (Guest Artists)  
Muscogee Creek/Kiowa



Micah Wesley is a Contemporary Kiowa/Muscogee Creek artist, as well as a DJ who performs weekly in Norman. Wesley has exhibited his artworks in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. He is also an adjunct professor in the Art Department of UCO instructing Native American Art history.

I have been interested in the fluid of Native American identities and in this series. I have omitted most notions and hints of Native American motifs and iconography, even color. I have chosen humble materials and a limited palette to convey complex issues of identity in the series. I have included the *Forgive Us Our Trespass* in the title to add a tint of Christianity and its influence on Native American history and identity. There are no motifs of Christianity in the painting as well, this is where the concept of the series as a whole survives. I do enjoy this painting's balance and spontaneity, and its subtle softness in contrast to the harsh materials.



**Michael Elizondo Jr.** (Guest Artist)  
(Southern Cheyenne/Kaw/Chumash)



Contemporary Native American Artist Michael Elizondo Jr., is a Tulsa native of Kaw and Chumash descent, a member of Southern Cheyenne Tribe. He has had numerous exhibitions around the country in Arizona, California, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Washington D.C.

He has also received various awards. Elizondo is currently an adjunct faculty member in the UCO Art Department

The subject matter of my work stems from the origin stories, ancient patterns, and sociological events that have shaped us as contemporary people. I take these inspirations and use my art as a building block to interpret my personal bloodlines and Indigenous background. In essence, art making is fun and creating new art forms that symbolize our time, just as our ancestors always have, is an exciting thing to add to history.



## Artists from the UCO Art Collections

### Woody Crumbo 1912-89, (Pottawatomi)

Born in Lexington, Oklahoma, of Pottawatomi and French lineage Woody Crumbo played a significant part in fostering the Native American Fine Arts Movement. His art emphasizes line and color illustrating the flat style with a minimum background and the traditional decorative patterns with silhouette treatment of figures. Crumbo advocated artists should break out from reproducing traditional symbols and pictographs to create original art that incorporates the traditions, iconography, and legends of Native American cultures.



### Doc Tate Nevaquaya 1932-96, (Comanche)

A renowned Native American flute maker and an accomplished flutist and painter, Doc made his home in Apache, Oklahoma. Doc was a self-taught artist, historian, flutist, composer, singer, and dancer. He exhibited his artwork extensively and won numerous awards and honors throughout the United States. Doc was one of the leaders in reviving traditional American Indian flute, reintroduced to the public in the 1970s.

**David Williams** 1933-85, (Kiowa/Apache/Tonkawa)

David Williams began his study of art at the Indian Art Center in Fort Sill, OK., under Olle Nordmark and later at Bacone College, in Muskogee, OK. He adopted the popular Kiowa flat-style of painting, which was modified into what became known as “Bacone Style” from the 1940s through the 1960s, which was required by the Philbrook Museum of Art annual competition. While at Bacone College Williams studied under artist Dick West. Bacone College was originally known as The Indian University,



founded by Almon C. Bacone around 1880 and was located in Tahlequah until around 1884. Williams worked in acrylic, gouache, pencil, prints and tempera winning numerous national awards for his paintings.

**Jerome Tiger** 1941-67, (Muscogee Creek-Seminole)

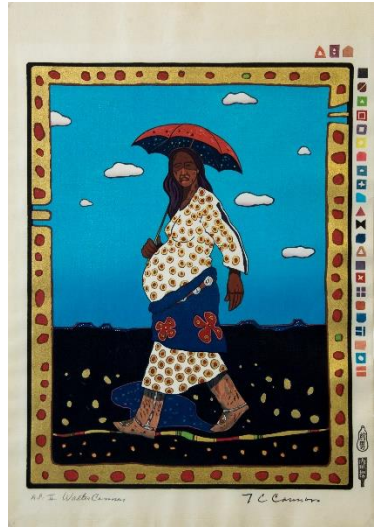
Jerome Richard Tiger, of Creek-Seminole heritage, is regarded as one of the most influential Native American artists of the twentieth century. He is often credited as one of the artists who stylistically bridged the gap between “traditional” Native American Art and



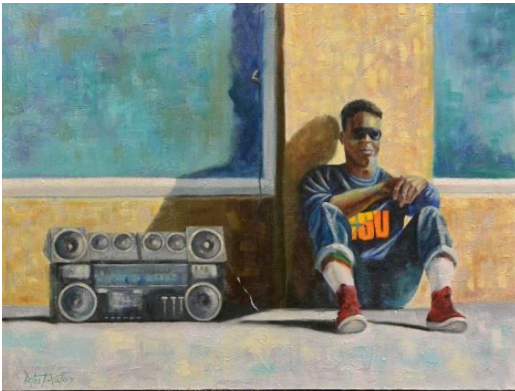
Contemporary Native American Art. Tiger was born in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, and spent his formative years in Eufaula and Muskogee, Oklahoma.

**T.C. Cannon** 1946-78, (Kiowa/Caddo)

Tommy Wayne Cannon “T.C. Cannon” was born in Lawton Oklahoma and raised around Gracemont near Anadarko. He attended the University of Central Oklahoma in the 1970s. Cannon developed a style uniquely his while using himself as the basis of his expression which contributed to the foundation of contemporary Native American art influencing its trajectory and inspiring the next generation of Native American Artist.



**Poteet Victory** 1947-, (Cherokee/Choctaw)



Poteet Victory was born and raised in Idabel, Oklahoma. He is considered one of the most successful contemporary Native American artists in the world. Although he is known for his abstracts, his painting from the UCO Collections offers a representational manner

completed in 1986 at UCO, Central State University at that time, where he received his B.F.A. Victory lived in New York for a time consulting with Andy Warhol and mingling with those at Warhol’s Factory. Today his studio is located upstairs at McLarry Modern in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

# Artist Profiles

## Woody Crumbo 1912-89

By Shikoh Shiraiwa

*“I feel that scholars shouldn’t wait until the Indian culture is destroyed by civilization [and] then dig into its ashes for inspiration, but [rather] acknowledge its importance today.”*

*Hines, 54*

Native Americans have always had an intimate connection to their creator, spirits, and nature. Their world was portrayed and decorated in their everyday objects and ceremonial artifacts. However, invasion of the west and its systematic cultural genocide pushed their tradition to the edge of annihilation. During the twentieth century, fewer and fewer people spoke ancient native languages. Traditional creative skills were also dying, as they were slowly absorbed by the dominant culture of Anglo-America. The federal policy even discouraged the teaching of Native American Art.

Woodrow Wilson Crumbo, known as Woody Crumbo played a significant part in fostering the Native American Fine Art Movement. He was born in Lexington Oklahoma in 1912 of Pottawatomi and French lineage. Crumbo became an orphan when he was seven years old and was adopted by a Creek family. He spent many summers in Anadarko, Oklahoma where there was a Kiowa reservation. It was there he met his first mentor, Aunt Susie Peter, who was a field matron with the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the Kiowa, Comanche, and Arapaho mission. She emphasized the traditional style of Native American Art. Peter sold twenty-two paintings by Crumbo that became a part of the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1932. This kick-started Crumbo’s professional career. He was a painter, silversmith, printmaker, and ethnic dancer who encouraged the next generation of artists to express themselves in a paradigm of the Native American custom. Crumbo



advocated that artists should break out from reproducing traditional symbols and pictographs to create original art that incorporates the traditions, iconography, and legends of Native Americans.

Whatever media Crumbo worked in, he emphasized line and color keeping the flat-style of minimum background and traditional decorative patterns with silhouette treatment of figures. In 1931, he was selected for, and attended the American Indian Institute in Wichita, Kansas, established by a Winnebago tribal member, Henry Roe Cloud. While he attended the institution, he learned from one of the “Kiowa Old Ones,” Belo Cozad who was a distinguished flute player and carver. Crumbo studied Kiowa culture, including carving and playing ceremonial flute in the tribe tradition.

Crumbo enrolled in Wichita State University where he had exposure to a well-known watercolorist, Clayton Henri Staples and a Native American musician and composer Thurlow Lieurance. Under Lieurance influence, Crumbo recorded native songs and chants and led a group of Native American dancers on a tour. While on tour through the reservations, he was further exposed to the diversity of native tribes and traditions. He observed details of their art traditions and tribal dress, which is visible in his artworks depicting different tribes’ costumes and dances.

Crumbo became the assistant director of art at Bacone Indian College in Oklahoma when he was twenty-six years old after two years of studying under Oscar Jacobson at the University of Oklahoma. Acee Blue Eagle who was one of the first distinguished Native American artists recommended Crumbo for the position. Thomas Gilcrease of Creek descent collected artworks of Acee Blue Eagle, Woody Crumbo, and Willard Stone who was a sculptor and one of Crumbo’s students. This collection became a nationally known Native American Art Collection at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma. While the museum was still under construction, Crumbo was an artist in residence.

In 1945 Crumbo traveled with and assisted Gilcrease in assembling the Native American Collection. In the same year, Crumbo became the first Native American awardee of the Julius Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship. Crumbo,

like Acee Blue Eagle, was very protective of artworks done by native people. He had every intention to use his position and power to create the new market for the Native American Art where the general public would have easier access.

By 1949, Crumbo had established a studio in Taos, New Mexico mastering screen-printing techniques. This new media made native art more affordable and increased the general public's awareness of the Native American Art. Crumbo worked and supported other indigenous artists exhibiting their artworks in museums and colleges. During this time, the well-known piece, "Spirit Horse" was created.

In the 1950s, Crumbo worked diligently with oil, watercolor, and egg tempera commemorating Native Americans who served the country in every war in foreign countries. Crumbo wanted to acknowledge that the percentage of Native participation in war was higher than any other races. Despite this fact there was no tribute to their bravery and patriotism.

Crumbo became a curator of the El Paso Museum of Art, Texas in 1960, and later, became its director. He continued to support Native American artists, as well as assisted Tigua Pueblos in regaining their tribal status with the Federal Government. Crumbo returned to Oklahoma in the 1970s and established his studio working on screen-prints and etching. He had been awarded many honors and was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1978 for his contribution to preserving and strengthening the Native American culture.

Crumbo was influential in bridging the gap between traditional Native American Art and more contemporary styles. However, he had experienced the consequences of getting away from the traditional style. Some of his artworks were rejected as non-Indian and non-traditional art because he used oil. He kept his silence. As Max Evans wrote, "His silence on the subject was to be expected because from the earliest age until his earthly departure, he was a man of great modesty, of great giving, and little taking. This trait was simply Woody Crumbo's soul-his existence."

Woody Crumbo's works have been celebrated throughout the United States, especially in Oklahoma; the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa; The Art Market in Oklahoma City; the Indian Territory Gallery in Sapulpa; the Pottawatomie Tribe Museum in Shawnee; the Oklahoma Indian Art Gallery, as well as museums and galleries in Arizona and Colorado.

## **David Williams 1933-85**

By Mattie Barlow

Kiowa style was widely popular in the 1930s. The market for “images of Indianness” pressured Native American artists to produce work in the style of art patrons expected. Art patrons did not want something innovative or unique, they sought “authentic” portrayals of traditional indigenous cultures.

Creating Native American art was also an important means of preserving knowledge of tribal cultures. Paintings detailed traditional costumes and decorations, lacking foregrounds, backgrounds and perspective, depicting nineteenth-century and contemporary customs and ceremonies. Student artists of the Indian Art Department at Bacone College, like David Williams, adopted the popular Kiowa style of painting and modified it into what became known as “Bacone Style”. Williams studied at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma under artist Dick West. (Bacone College was originally known as The Indian University, founded by Almon C. Bacone around 1880 and was located in Talequah until around 1884.)

There are two things worth noting about Bacone College, (1) it is closely associated with the American Baptist Church and (2) artists of more than 150 tribes and nations have studied there since its founding in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Jerome Tiger 1941-67**

By Josiah Cogan

Jerome Richard Tiger, of Creek-Seminole heritage, is regarded as one of the most influential Native American artists of the twentieth century. He is often credited as one of the artists who stylistically bridged the gap between “traditional” Native American Art and contemporary Native American Art. Tiger was born in Tahlequah, Oklahoma on July 8, 1941. He spent his formative years in Eufaula and Muskogee, Oklahoma.

As a child, Tiger began displaying an artistic flair, creating sketches of people and animals. On several occasions, Tiger was disciplined at school for sketching in his books. Disillusioned with the confines of formal education, at age 16 he dropped out of school and joined the U.S. Naval Reserve.

After the Navy, Tiger settled down in Muskogee, working as a laborer and occasionally as a prizefighting boxer. However, he continued to foster his artistic passion. In addition to sketching, he also experimented with different types of paints. As an artist, Tiger was virtually self-taught. He briefly attended the Cooper Institute in Cleveland, Ohio in the early 1960s under the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ urban relocation program. Otherwise, he had no formal training.

The seminal moment of Tiger’s career came in 1962, when Nettie Wheeler, his friend and mentor, advised him to submit his artwork to Philbrook Art Museum’s American Indian Artists Annual in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Not only was his artwork received with acclaim, but Tiger was exposed to the world of Native American art for the first time. Tiger was especially intrigued by the works of Blackbear Bosin and Oscar Howe. Though both relied on some traditional stylistic elements in their work, they infused it with their own personal and abstract touches.

Bosin and Howe’s influence inspired Tiger to develop his own unique style of art that both extended and transcended the boundaries of traditional Native

American art. Some in the Native American artistic community criticized Tiger's style, since it defied the convention of the "traditional" style. Most Native American Art was characterized by a "flat style," featuring basic composition, bright colors, and a lack of precise perspective and background detail. Prominent Native American artist Woody Crumbo stated that since Tiger had not seen much traditional Native American art when he began his career, he was not intellectually limited by its confines. He said that Tiger "paid little attention to flat lines and traditional use of color and starting gradating his tones. There was a softness, a fineness, a real delicacy" in his work, featuring "good drawing and good composition."

Tiger often used white paint to tone down some of his colors. He was also anatomically precise in his depictions of people, unlike many Native American artists of the time. He used live models (including family, friends, and even himself) in order to create realistic poses for the subjects in his paintings. His technique and the tone of his artwork have even drawn comparisons to those of European Renaissance artists, including Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

His favorite medium was tempera painting on poster board. Since tempera was also the predominant medium of traditional Native American art, this was one of Tiger's most notable concessions to convention. However, he also created works using watercolor, casein, oil, pen and ink, pencil, and displayed a talent for sculpting with clay.

For subject matter, Tiger followed his grandfather's beseeching to "Paint what the Creek has in his heart." Tiger's unique style married "spiritual vision, humane understanding, and technical virtuosity" with traditional composition and subjects. Many of his paintings focused on mystical and spiritual subjects, and often reflected on death. Shirking the stereotypical images of Native Americans donning war paint and headdresses, Tiger also found inspiration in the common activities of the Native Americans in his community. A deeply emotional artist, Tiger was able to portray the lives, feelings, and experiences of Native Americans in a way that was accessible to the general public. Tiger

helped initiate a movement in Native American Art that used images of native people to powerfully articulate their dignity and humanity.

Between 1962 and 1967, Tiger released hundreds of artworks to widespread success and acclaim. His extensive list of awards included wins at all of the major Native American Art expositions in the country. His work was in such demand he was able to support his wife Peggy and his children entirely with his art. The crowning moment of his career came in 1966, when his paintings sold out at a solo exhibition at Philbrook Museum. In order to meet the demand, Tiger replaced all of the paintings at the exhibition twice over.

With his commercial career taking off, Tiger began the process of shifting his image from a strictly Native American artist to a “fine artist” who painted Native American subjects. However, Tiger’s life and career were tragically cut short at the age of 26 when he died in a handgun accident on August 13, 1967 in Eufala, Oklahoma. His legacy lives on as one of the fathers of the contemporary Native American Art Movement, and as one of the most influential Oklahoma artists. In 2000, *Oklahoma Today* included Tiger in their list of the “50 Most Influential Oklahomans of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.”

Much of his artwork remains in private collections. However, there are many public repositories that feature Tiger’s artwork in their collections, including Woolaroc Museum in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, Philbrook

Museum, Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the OSU Museum of Art in Stillwater, Oklahoma, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the United States Department of the Interior, the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., the Five Civilized Tribes Museum in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe.

## T.C. Cannon 1946-78

By Nicole Willard

*my determined eye,  
my resolute heart,  
my singular searching soul...  
all have windows from which  
I watch endlessly*

*T.C. Cannon*

Bob Dylan, the Vietnam War, Woodstock, the Pop Art scene in NYC galleries, all radical influences during a tumultuous time in American history. These influences along with the continuous mental consumption of works from philosophers like Nietzsche and Kant, stimulated the creativity of Tommy Wayne Cannon. He developed a style uniquely his own while using himself as the bases of his expression. Cannon was a quiet, reflective man described as having Brahman like quality with a strong aura. “His presence alone was strong enough that he didn’t have to talk,” commented Lloyd New, Director of the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA) during Cannon’s time there. Cannon didn’t care for his art being referred to as Indian art. He used the analogy, “People don’t call work by Picasso Spanish art they call it a Picasso.” Just as Picasso helped to found a new movement in modern art so did Cannon contribute to the foundation of contemporary Native American art influencing its trajectory and inspiring the next generation of Native American Artist.

Born in Lawton Oklahoma and raised around Gracemont near Anadarko, Cannon had a humble and traditional childhood. He was greatly influenced by his Kiowa father and chose to be part of that Society over the Caddo heritage of his mother. He began sketching when he was very young winning awards for his art in elementary school. Along with art he began writing and playing the guitar. His father, Walter, speaks about an essay T.C. wrote in high school saying, “T.C. always believed he would die young.” Throughout his life T.C. shared this thought with his family and friends. Whether it was his fate or a self-fulfilling prophecy Cannon’s life was cut short by an automobile accident on May 8, 1978 at the young age of 32 near his beloved Santa Fe, NM. Perhaps



it was this premonition of an early death that drove Cannon to work at such a furious pace. Commenting on his death many of his family and friends said he was always working to produce something. One of his contemporaries Manuelita Lovato said, “TC was always working to create. He always had a note pad and would be sketching or writing down a thought even when we would sit down to eat.”

Cannon left Oklahoma to study art at the newly formed Institute of American Indian Art in 1964. He would flourish there under the guidance of faculty like art instructors Fritz Scholder, and Allan Houser, guitar instructor Michael Lord and Director Lloyd New. After leaving IAIA in 1966 Cannon went to the San Francisco Art Institute. He was there less than two months before he learned he was to be drafted. He decided to enlist before being drafted so he could choose his area of service. He enlisted in the army. As a paratrooper in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Cannon was sent to Vietnam from 1967-68. While in Vietnam he earned two Bronze Stars for his bravery. He killed two Viet Cong while there and it never left him. The effects of war informed his art.

In 1972 while a student at the University of Central Oklahoma, Cannon got his big break. Adelyn D. Breeskin of the Smithsonian Institutes, American Museum of Art, while visiting one of Cannon’s former IAIA teachers Fritz Scholder, suggested a two-person show. She wanted Scholder to exhibit with one of his former students. Scholder chose T.C. Cannon. The show titled *Two American Painters* opened at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington D.C. to good reviews. When the show closed it traveled to London, Berlin, Romania, and Yugoslavia. This exhibition brought Cannon’s work to the world stage.

Rebelling against the Native American art tradition of what Cannon referred to as, “cartoon paintings of bambi like deer reproduced over and over,” he decidedly took a different approach. He expertly fused Native cultural heritage and contemporary issues into his art. His work represents a reverence for his tribal heritage mixed with his view of the modern world in ironic juxtaposition. This can be seen in one of his most famous works *Collector #5*, in which Cannon depicts a Pawnee Chief dressed in regalia looking like a dandy, casually sitting in a Victorian wicker chair with Van Gogh’s *Wheat Field with*

*a Lark* hanging prominently in the background. Making it seem as though the chief is a collector of fine European Art, Cannon mingles elements of both cultures and sets it in time with the Victorian wicker rocker. This draws attention to a period in American History when Native Americans were being forced to assimilate to White values. Using bold colors he makes a statement about what was glaringly wrong with the human condition in a satirical way. Most of his work has a message told in detail through a mixing of iconic images.

There are a number of painters whose first sense of discovery was through Cannon and their admiration for him. Cannon's clarity of vision had artists like Ishkoten Dougi describing Cannon as, "One of the gods of our time." Dougi also commented, "He felt energy from TC's work that made him want to be more than he could be." Another Native artist inspired by TC's work, Ben Shorty said, "He wanted to take TC's work one step further." The idea of Cannon's importance comes from his ability to develop a process of using himself as the basis of his expression. His concern about Indian things had no particular stylistic limitations. It was a matter of evolving something to fit what he want to say.

Cannon was a self-made man, a true success story who made the most of the opportunities given to him. His place in history is cemented by the sheer amount of work he did in several different mediums during his short but prolific life.

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#### **Artist Website**

Micah Wesley <http://www.feedthebares.com>

Michael Elizondo <http://www.michaelelizondojr.com/home>

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