THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

SIX AMERICAN INDIAN MOTIFS ADAPTED TO CONTEMPORARY PICTORIAL PRINCIPLES

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN ART

BY

WALTER RICHARD WEST

Norman, Oklahoma

1950

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
LIBRARY

Downloaded from SHAREOK. Persistent Handle URL: https://hdl.handle.net/11244/330761

378.76
Ok0
W52125
cop.2

SIX AMERICAN INDIAN MOTIFS

ADAPTED TO

CONTEMPORARY PICTORIAL PRINCIPLES

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART

[redacted]

331644

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to express his sincere appreciation to the entire art faculty and especially to his major advisor, Leonard Phelps Good, Professor of Art, for his complete understanding, encouragement, and unfailing assistance throughout his study at the University of Oklahoma.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS v

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. SIOUX GIRL 3

III. SOLDIER DANCE 6

IV. RED POND 9

V. THANKSGIVING PRAYER 12

VI. MASKED DANCERS 15

VII. BUFFALO MIGRATION 18

SIX AMERICAN INDIAN MOTIFS

ADAPTED TO

CONTEMPORARY PICTORIAL PRINCIPLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In past years Indian artists have presented their history and legends in pictures stylized and simplified without background or modeling of the figures. Through painting, study, and teaching, the author-artist feels there is a definite need for new expression in Indian Art.

In the past twenty-five or thirty years Indian art has been cultivated and acclaimed. But the subject matter of the traditional type of Indian painting has been done over and over to the point of becoming hackneyed. Since there is little possibility of growth in this style of painting, the Indian artist must inevitably turn in the direction of more contemporary two- or three-dimensional studies. To reach this new approach, more advanced art work, making more demands on the artist, will become a necessity. In fact, this tendency is already apparent among the present day Indian artists. However, some among them are not successfully achieving their aims due to a lack of understanding the principles inherent in formal art training.

In the six oil paintings and the written explanations which accompany them, this candidate will endeavor to demonstrate these ideas. In each painting an Indian motif will be used, but will be adapted to contemporary pictorial principles. To demonstrate the numerous possibilities, the paintings will vary in style from the comparatively realistic to extreme abstraction. It is hoped this work may in a small way prove helpful to other Indian artists and lead toward a brighter future for Indian art.

CHAPTER II

SIOUX GIRL

The first subject selected, to be painted as a fairly conventional portrait, was an Indian girl. This model was painted to illustrate a comparatively realistic approach to portraiture, not in the two-dimensional treatment of traditional Indian art.

The traditional Indian artist would record this figure without background and without reference to individual characteristics. The figure would be partially geometric, with all color areas flat and with a linear treatment enclosing each color area. Any realistic qualities attained would be through a gradation of related color harmonies in the flat areas. Perhaps the most outstanding characteristics were in the faculty for recording minute details and decorative patterns.

The contemporary treatment for this painting was in competition with many white artists who have adopted Indian subjects. The subject and artifacts were arranged in an informal composition in which color and form relate the subject and background. Typical conventions found in portraiture, such as modulations for light and shadow, contrast of warm and cool colors, and projection and recession of tonal qualities, were found throughout.

To achieve a comparatively realistic work, the areas of the canvas were related according to academic three-dimensional techniques. Attempts to approach photographic versimilitude of all objects in the composition continued throughout the portrait, with extra care to balance warm and cool colors. To unite the color areas, glazes were run across edges, quieting the shadows and placing the different sections in better recognition of the picture plane. A few parts were scumbled with the palette knife.

In "Sioux Girl", the typical brilliance of Indian colors was used, but subdued by atmospheric tonality. This, plus the quiet pose of the model, produced a feeling of repose.



SIOUX GIRL, oil on canvas 43" x 30"

CHAPTER III

SOLDIER DANCE

The three figures in "Soldier Dance" were suggested by a two-dimensional study painted by the artist. The original picture was a large group composition involving twenty or more figures. The unusual combination of colors in the body paints and the angularity of the dance steps suggested an interesting subject study for compositional purposes.

The problem in this composition was unusual in several respects. The artist attempted to place the three figures in such a manner that they formed a cylindrical arrangement which was centered on the canvas. Going against customary procedure, that of receding from light to dark, in this instance the foreground and two forward figures were painted in darker values. The lightest portion of the picture was on, around, and in the back of the third figure.

To create a center of interest, the dominant warm colors and deepest darks were placed on the figures. In contrast, predominantly cool colors were used in the background and around the figures to balance the warmer tones, and to accentuate the effect of the figures in broken silhouette./ For technique in color application and surface texture the palette knife was used almost exclusively on the entire picture. In particular, this helped to minimize modeling on the figures,

and to create a texture in the background which, when glazed, produced a feeling of fantasy in the picture. The angular movement of the dancers, as if observed while still in motion, adds to this mood. Of the three, the central figure would be the focal point because he bears the darkest and lightest colors and is, in contrast to the others, unglazed.

By minimizing the modeling of this picture and using a less credible background than in "Sioux Girl", one step was taken in the direction of the abstractions to be done later in this series of paintings.

SOLDIER DANCE, oil on [illegible] 22" x 22"



SOLDIER DANCE, oil on canvas 28" x 22"

CHAPTER IV

RED POND

Though landscapes, by themselves, were seldom used by Indian artists, a later stage of development in their paintings showed an introduction of plant forms and stylized clouds and mountains to suggest landscape backgrounds. With the Southwestern group, historical evidence has shown a higher development and longer use of pictorial representations than among the Plains group. In friezes on the walls of their sacred chambers, or Kivas, the former group depicted their life and locale. Here were found scenes showing mountains, vegetation, and cliff dwellings. All were done in simple linear form, some in symbolism.

Thus there is a basis for the use of landscape in this series of studies suggesting possible development for Indian art. It broadens the scope of usable subject matter and still allows the Indian approach in handling color and design in the contemporary field.

The sketches for "Red Pond" were inspired by the uniqueness of the red clay countryside of western Oklahoma, long the home of the American Indian. The first two sketches, one black-and-white, the other in color, were realistic recordings of the scene. The problem in the third sketch was to single out the most important factors of movement

and form from the first sketches. These factors were given diagrammatic treatment to accentuate the pattern and movement in rhythmical patterns of darks and lights.

The final step was to take these diagrammatic elements and purposely strive to give them a somewhat expressionistic treatment. In this treatment, recognizable subject matter is sacrificed for the purpose of creating form in expressive coherence. These geometric patterns allow a more subtle handling of color, and the subject matter becomes subject to states of mind or emotional response rather than staying close to visual recording of objects. This was exemplified in the treatment of the tree and cloud forms in color and motion. For instance, the deep darks of the clouds were balanced by the high lights of the logs in the foreground. The pond itself and the tree reflected in it were accentuated by the land and tree color patterns which surround them.

Though this painting is in many ways far removed from the ancient friezes found on Kiva walls, there is a similarity of design and handling of color. But these elements were enriched by the more diversified principles of contemporary treatment.



RED POND, oil on canvas 31" x 43"

CHAPTER V

THANKSGIVING PRAYER

To fulfill a long felt desire to fill a canvas with diverse Indian designs and colors, this painting was conceived. The symbols used were selected from Navajo sand-paintings, Hopi sun symbols, and various types of iconography found in Plains Indian pictographs, all related here because they pertain to foods.

In order to assemble these designs, a curved linear arrangement spiralling in depth was chosen. To fulfill the progression of spiral movement, shapes whose linear qualities contributed diminishing sizes were supported by color gradations. The predominant central shapes of the buffalo's head and the Hopi sun were encircled by the spiral motion to form centers of attention. Angular areas were placed around and through the major spiral to vary it and strengthen its tempo. To avoid monotony in the large angular areas outside of the spiral, small designs of subordinate interest were used. These follow the same direction of movement as the large spiral design.

The color usage in this painting is important because it is typical of the Indian's love for vivid colors. To use these colors successfully, the artist has tried various ranges of warm and cool colors

both in spectrum and neutralized combinations. These color combinations create complementary contrasts and harmonies that balance the differing spaces supporting the spiral movement.

The various tribal designs found in the whole composition are symbolic of the life and religious beliefs of the western American Indian. A buffalo, in this painting the dominant central figure, meant food, shelter, even life itself to the tribes of the plains. Besides this, he held an important place in their religious beliefs. The Hopi sun represents one of their deities, insuring successful harvests. In sandpaintings, the Navajo symbolized the figure of his deities. The oval shapes below the buffalo are conventionalized designs representing man. The dark linear projections represent the wings of birds and give an appearance of many legs, suggesting herds of buffalo. This painting is pure flat design done as a symbolic abstraction, but many of the technical attractions of oil pigments add their extra bulk and depth to the plan.



THANKSGIVING PRAYER, oil on canvas 24" 30"

CHAPTER VI

THE MASKED DANCERS

Abstractions in blocky shapes moving on common pivots play an important part in establishing sensations of simultanist movement. The basic theories of this movement depend on what can be derived from geometric patterns descended from primitive African sculpture. The cubists' and simultanists' use of this Negroid sculpture provided an ideal method for a contemporary treatment of American Indian motifs. This type of work is attempted in "The Masked Dancers".

This painting is a figure study executed in semi-abstract form employing many elements of cubism and simultanism. Flat cubism appears in the treatment of the heads, seen in both profile and frontal views. It also aids in carrying out the complete distortion of the figures. This distortion accented the angularity and disproportion of the dancer's anatomies.

The color treatment in most abstractions uses areas laid flat on the picture plane. This is evident in many early works by Picasso and Braque after 1908. At different stages in their careers, textural variations occurred. Interest in these technical devices led to an attempt in "The Masked Dancers" to combine effectively flat surfaces

of soft and harsh colors in varied textures. The warm and cool colors are relieved by neutral intensities. Small color areas recur in such a manner as to create an over all pattern, tending to equalize the play of color and movement. The problem of imparting a sensation of grotesque action to the dancers, without realistic treatment, was met by accents of light against dark, and by an outline, broadly and blackly striped.

Here again are similarities to the Indian artist painting in his traditional manner. Like the cubists and simultanists, he also used lines for movement and harmony. But this painting becomes more contemporarily abstract by combining linear-enclosed areas with overlapped areas to create relationships of time and space factors on the painted surface of the composition.

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
LIBRARY



MASKED DANCERS, oil on canvas 30" x 22"

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
LIBRARY

CHAPTER VII

BUFFALO MIGRATION

This painting entered a special realm of surrealism where symbols take the place of realistic representation in the dream world. This, at the same time, embodied many of the principles of abstract design. The object was to suggest the buffalo shapes as conventionalized by many American Indian tribes. Heads, horns, hooves, and other parts of the buffalo bodies were presented flatly patterned from various points of view. Consciously adapted to one of the most esoteric contemporary treatments, this resulting design, very geometric and bisymmetrically balanced in its original Indian form, began a sort of migration toward freer forms in a more spiritual kingdom. A fantastic playfulness inserted itself pictorially, but the poetic suggestions continued to express themselves from an Indian's approach.

An attempt to simplify shapes stressing informal curves produced a floating quality. The background colors were muted and lightened, enlarging the scope of the surroundings, making the rhythms of the dark buffalo shapes appear broader and looser.

The motif then seemed to move against a happy background composed of four large, slightly modulated areas closely related in value but differing in hue. Against orange, blue, yellow green, and neutral

gray, the black buffalo shapes drift, some linear, some in silhouette, with touches of vermilion, white, gray, and green, achieving an active state of irregular balance. These contrasting elements gave the painting's comparatively simple areas a somewhat decorative quality.

If an observer is familiar with the geometric designs of the Plains Indians, he will be able to recognize the symbols which were used as subject matter, although the Indian motifs have been adapted to a more sophisticated awareness of surrealism and fantasy. The result may invest more importance in the symbolism, strengthening a theme that is inherently rich, robust, lively and forceful. It should evoke a spontaneous supernal response.

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
LIBRARY



BUFFALO MIGRATION, oil on canvas 24" x 32"

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
LIBRARY

This volume is the property of the University, but the literary rights of the author are a separate property and must be respected. Passages must not be copied or closely paraphrased without the previous written consent of the author. If the reader obtains any assistance from this volume, he must give proper credit in his own work.

A library which borrows this thesis for use by its patrons is expected to secure the signature of each user.

This thesis by _____ has been used by the following persons, whose signatures attest their acceptance of the above restrictions.

NAME AND ADDRESS DATE

