

# DISCOVERING NATIVE AMERICA

## Contemporary & Traditional Indian Art

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**Old Town School of Folk Music**

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**Beacon Street Gallery**  
4520 N. Beacon  
Chicago, Illinois



### *An Artistic Encounter With the First Americans*

**Gallery Hours:** Wednesday thru Saturday,  
11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

**Exhibit Curators:** Paul Tyler  
Sharon Skolnick

**Commentary:** Manny Skolnick

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Welcome to *Discovering Native America*, a showcase of American Indian art and craft bringing the vitality of local Native culture forcefully to the attention of Chicagoland. The Columbus quincentennial provides an invitation and a challenge to discover the rich and continuing Native contribution to the American cultural mix. The aim of this exhibit is to show that Indian art and culture remain vibrant and vital in their adaptations to the demands of Twentieth Century life.

Our hope is that art will help to put a human face on people who have too often been stereotyped by the dominant culture as noble savages or dehumanized villains. As first-nighters have the chance to meet these talented artists in person, *Discovering Native America* will give all Chicago the chance to meet them through their art.



## What is American Indian Art?

Keep the question before you as you view the exhibit. The answers that come easily to mind include both the traditional crafts of beadwork, basketry, silver-smithing, leatherwork and the like, and the typical portraiture of noble braves and western landscapes. The challenging paintings, sculpture, and crafts in *Discovering Native American* — by Eugene Pine, Durango Mendoza, Okee-Chee, Richard Red Owl, Francis Yellow, Joe Yazzie, Richard SkyHawk, Tony Cachapero, Robert Wapahi, Mildred Cleghorn, Lynette Perry, Debra Dawn, and Gail Thorpe — will convince you that no simple answer will do.

Native American culture is a world culture, which is to say two things: it is rich, varied, complex, and subtle — as are all great cultures — and it is no isolate, but has already had an important influence on the world of art. While it is undeniably true that modern Native artists have been swayed by European traditions and have readily adopted Western forms and media, it is also true that many contemporary Anglo artists are influenced by Native traditions (the art of the Americas had a profound impact on the Surrealists, Picasso, and many seminal modernists). The same Native influences pervade American popular culture.

We do not look here for anything like pristine culture, with the artist simply a voice representing a larger, primeval whole. Rather, we recognize that each artist creates a personal and private vision. Of course, the clash of cultures, the issue of acculturation challenges each of these sensitive artists. And it is still possible to discern in these innovative works traditional designs, motifs, and attitudes about the visual that characterize Native American art.

**An Aesthetic of Use.** Native cultures make no distinction between art and craft, between matter and spirit. They understand the world to be a complex of dependencies between essentially spiritual beings — a harmony of gift and use. Men acknowledge the blessings they receive from the plant and animal worlds through ritual behavior and full use.

Art is one aspect of that ritual behavior, of the full use of nature's gifts. That is why you will find elements of collage — feathers, leather, beads — incorporated so comfortably into much of the artwork. Why Durango Mendoza's wooden sculptures seem to discover an animated spirit in the wood itself. Why Francis Yellow's ledger art recycles the discarded ledger paper of the Anglo society into fascinating cultural-historical commentaries on tribal life. Why Eugene Pine transforms animal skulls into fetish objects of extraordinary power.

**Transformations.** Native artists acknowledge the realms of nature and spirit as the prime source of their artistic images. At the same time, they recognize a communication between the two worlds, a fluidity of forms as new meanings emerge. Joe Yazzie gives Navajo crafts — turquoise and silver jewelry — the heroic dimensions of landscape in his powerfully erotic canvases; a feathered headdress becomes a living bird in Tony Cachapero's "Apogee"; a wonderfully energized buffalo leaves a line of leather tracks in Richard Red Owl's "Buffalo Trails." This is challenging, dynamic art that honors no comfortable illusions about the stability of the real.

**The Decorative Impulse.** Native art emerges in a close association with the utilitarian — a passionate desire to make useful objects beautiful. Traditional crafts enhance the mundane; delicate beadwork, for example, graces the moccasin that treads through mud and grass. The decorative impulse plays just as prominent a role in contemporary Indian fine art. Consider portraits by Okee-Chee and Tony Cachapero which treat the human figure primarily as an arrangement of forms and colors rather than as a psychological entity.

**The Dimension of the Spirit.** Creating an illusion of three-dimensional space, a pre-occupation of Western art since the Renaissance, is of little interest to Native artists. Even spectacles of the most intense action, like Richard Red Owl's "Spotted Eagle" explode out of an abstract, geometric, two-dimensional space. In many cultures, spiritual expression occurs most comfortably in a space of two dimensions. Indian art agrees.

**Discovering Native America.** We hope that as you enjoy this personal and distinctive art, you will also note some of the attitudes that unite these very different people as American Indian artists. From their work, created in our midst, we are given a glimpse of what it means to be Chippewa or Menominee or Lakota and, at the same time, Native American and a private citizen.



## Meet the Artists Who Bring You *Discovering Native America*

**Eugene Pine.** The noted Chippewa painter, ceramist, and jewelry designer grew up in Wisconsin's north woods and Chicago's mean streets, intimate with both worlds. Eugene moved to Denver for a time, developing a reputation as a rising Native star through a number of important shows, before returning to live in Chicago. The mystical attraction of the Southwestern desert, as well as the influence of important Native contemporaries like T. C. Cannon, is evident in paintings like "Cow Poking."

The painter imbues such traditional Southwestern motifs as lizards and skulls with the primal power of fetish figures in canvases (and shields, and more) that retain a quirkiness most personal, while display a biting sense of humor. The painted skulls are only one example of Eugene's ability to work in Native media that are startling in a Western context.

**Joe Yazzie.** The Navajo painter grew up amidst the spectacular canyons, arroyos, and mesas of Monument Valley and Canyon de Chelle. Their mystical vistas inhabit his mature canvases. Yazzie moved to Chicago after a tour in Viet Nam, studied commercial art, raised a family, and became a fixture on the local Native art scene where — as a founding member of the Chicago Indian Artist Guild — he has exhibited widely for twenty years.

His canvases affirm the erotic as an appropriate and satisfying subject for Native art. Like another celebrated Navajo painter (R.C. Gorman), Yazzie accentuates a feature of his monumental women (thankfully, not the feet) so that the heroically proportioned women and their stunning turquoise and silver jewelry are well matched to the majestic scenery of Navajo country.

**Richard Red Owl.** The dynamic, award-winning Oglala Sioux painter Richard Red Owl was born on the Pine Ridge reservation in south Dakota's badlands, where he currently resides. A self-taught artist, his dramatic canvases convey the color and pageantry of traditional Sioux life. Influences include the great Sioux master Oscar Howe, whose abstractions influence the energetic abstract backgrounds of Red Owl's masterful canvases "Buffalo Trails" (winner of the White Buffalo Award at the Red Cloud Art Show and third in the Crazy Horse Art Show) and "Home Maker." Red Owl has developed a personal style that charges the essentially static compositions of such classical Plains artists as Harrison Begay (see also the ledger art of Francis Yellow) with an intense dynamism and vivid coloration characteristic of Siouxs tribal life.

**Okee-Chee (Sharon Skolnick).** The local Apache-Sioux gallery owner and long-time promoter of Native art in Chicago is herself an accomplished painter and craftsperson, as this exhibit amply demonstrates. Sharon, a Fort Sill Apache raised in Oklahoma, began to develop her distinctive style at The Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. Since coming to Chicago twenty years ago, she has been principal organizer of many local showings of Native art, and is co-curator of *Discovering Native America*. Okee-Chee's horses have become instantly recognizable to many patrons of Indian art. Note her distinctive "Horse Travois" and her spectacular work on the featured Inter-Tribal Pow Wow doll diorama.

**Tony Cachapero.** The Cherokee painter, commercial artist, and Bucktown legend is an urban sophisticate who, perhaps surprisingly to his friends, paints his Native heritage with undeniable passion and great sensitivity. His "Kiowa Dance" treats the figure of the dancer as a powerful visual emblem rooted in ancient traditions of the dance. The same iconic treatment of a human subject appears in his commanding "Apogee." Here is a presence larger than any individual, providing nothing less than an artistic communion with the spirit of a people.

**Richard SkyHawk.** The Nez-Perce-Umatilla painter (and local legend) is a restless spirit whose wanderings have taken him from his native Washington state to Chicago (for several years) and on to the former USSR, where he has been part of a Run For Peace and Freedom taking him from Latvia to Mongolia in the course of two fascinating, adventurous years.

SkyHawk's heroic canvases artfully integrate natural items and found objects, discovering a kind of totemic power in the mundane. SkyHawk also relishes controversial political statement; his "Dog Soldier" honors the figure of the warrior and uses its flags to bind the tribal warrior to his modern counterparts.

**Durango Mendoza.** The Muskogee-Creek sculptor and author of memorable short stories is a commercial artist and Oak Park resident. Mendoza has recently returned to school at Columbia College, and these fascinating, highly personal explorations are the result.

At once profound meditations on the cultural dilemma of the Native artist and iconic embodiments of "the spirit of the wood," these most accomplished sculptures suggest the range of contemporary Native



art. The shield "Autobiography" and the sculpture "Self-Portrait" both employ mutilated photographic images to reveal the artist squeezed or torn between traditional and modern worlds.

**Francis Yellow.** A fascinating man of two worlds, Francis Yellow is both a college graduate and a master of Lakota ritual and medicine. He has taken his large family from his South Dakota home to the midwest, where he serves many as a traditional spiritual leader.

Francis Yellow identifies with traditional Lakota culture in his ledger art. When buffalo hides were no longer available, Sioux painter-historians of the late Nineteenth Century recorded historical scenes of tribal life on the discarded pages of BIA ledger books. Francis Yellow records contemporary celebrations of tribal culture on the 80-year-old ledger sheets of a Masonic Temple (which has, for thirty years, housed the American Indian Center). Again, dead Anglo records are transformed into living Native art in an ultimate validation of the aesthetic of full use.

**Robert Wapahi.** This Lakota artist has become an important activist in the Chicago Native community. Robert works at the St. Augustine's Center and helps to organize local art exhibits through the American Indian Center. Robert's artistic world is complex, imaginative, and richly involved with the dimension of the spiritual. His dancer becomes an eagle before our eyes; his people are multi-dimensional; his tipis are imbued with the spirits of past occupants.

**Debra Dawn.** This delightful Chippewa woman is a suburban housewife, mother, and master of an astonishing range of traditional crafts. Her beadwork, headdresses, leather crafts, feathers, skins, charms, keychains, and more are triumphant evidence that the traditional skills with which Native women decorated their tribal world continue to flourish. First-nighters will have the special pleasure of watching Debra as she works her special magic.

**The Inter-Tribal Pow Wow Doll Diorama.** This remarkable assemblage of dolls in authentic tribal costume is almost as much fun as a real pow wow. The dolls in Sioux, Choctaw, Plains, and Chippewa traditional dress and in flamboyant fancy dance costumes with feather bustles are primarily the work of Okee-Chee. We call your attention especially to the Chippewa jingle-dress; the Comanche veteran in porcupine roach bearing a simulated eagle staff of prairie grouse feathers by Joe Peralez; the authentic Navajo dressed by Pauline Begay and wearing authentic silver belt and jewelry by her son Neubert; the beaded belts and bands, leather moccasins and costumes by Chippewa Anna Griffith, the exquisite miniature necklaces by Navajo jeweler David Lee, a miniature painting by Menominee Myrna Zhukahosee, pottery and other miniatures by Vonda Skolnick. Vonda Gluck and Deanna DeMarrias also contributed.



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