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REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PLAINS INDIAN PAINTING

MARY JANE SCHNEIDER

It may seem but a short leap from the earliest red, white, and black markings on rock walls to the sophisticated abstract expressionism of contemporary Native American art, and only a small step from geometric designs painted on hides to hard-edge geometric forms on canvas, but the development of Plains Indian painting from prehistoric times to the twentieth century is a journey from the Stone Age to the Nuclear Age, from tribal to urban society. Plains Indian painting reflects the historical and geographical diversity of the region as well as the pluralistic culture of modern Native Americans. It is an interesting commentary on American attitudes toward Indians, however, that more attention has been paid to paintings produced and used in tribal society than to contemporary Indian art. Differences in tribal painting styles have been identified and described, but little attention has been directed toward documenting

current differences in regional art styles.¹ The reasons for this neglect are many, but perhaps the greatest is a belief that modern Indian art is so Euro-American in form and content that it has lost its distinctive identity as Indian.² Certainly, Native Americans who have moved into the national urban art scene produce pictures that are almost indistinguishable from the work of their non-Indian contemporaries, but these individuals represent only a small proportion of Indian artists. Contemporary painting, as it is practiced by artists who live on or near reservations in the Great Plains, is a complex synthesis of tribal traditions, Euro-American influences, and individual visions that cannot be categorized simply as modern. Although general trends in Plains Indian painting can be identified, different events and varied traditional cultures have produced an art with considerable temporal and geographical diversity.

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TRIBAL DIFFERENCES IN PAINTING STYLES

Rock art, consisting of painted or engraved human, animal, and symbolic figures dating from prehistoric to early historic times, is

found throughout the periphery of the plains, wherever there are boulders or rock surfaces large enough to serve as easels. It is difficult to date rock art with any accuracy, but comparisons to hide paintings, analysis of overlapping figures, observation of weathering and erosion, and the presence of horses and guns in some works help to provide some idea of the temporal progression of styles. One rock art motif, the shield, which occurs from prehistoric to historic times, shows changes in size and decoration, and the way in which the human figure is depicted becomes more skillful with the passage of time.³

For the most part, studies of rock art have been concerned with recording examples and establishing relative chronologies, but a few scholars have noticed that rock art painting styles differ from place to place. A particular form of human figure with a V-shaped body from which a long neck topped by a round head emerges is widespread in the northern plains, while the shield-bearing warrior motif has a more limited distribution in Montana and northern Wyoming.⁴

Some characteristics of rock art, such as a lack of perspective, the treatment of the rock surface as a series of individual canvases with figures superimposed on each other, little concern with relative size or scale, and an emphasis on activity, continued into recent times. The purpose of these paintings is not known, but it seems likely that some were religiously motivated and others served as a means of communication. Abstract forms may relate to vision quests or hunting magic, while some of the animal scenes may indicate places where game could be found or the location of hunting camps.⁵ In later plains art, the message-bearing aspect was very important.

Rock painting offers intriguing possibilities for the study of temporal and regional differences, but works done on hide provide greater opportunities for documenting changes in time and for stylistic and tribal attribution. Tribal use of paint ranged from elaborate geometric designs on robes, parfleches, and sacred bundle containers to representational paintings

on shirts, tipi covers, tipi linings, robes, and shields. Most of these works were produced and utilized under ceremonial or sacred circumstances, and each tribe had its own style of ornamentation.⁶

The oldest known representational paintings on hide are the robes and shirts collected by explorers who visited the northern plains in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1805, Lewis and Clark collected an example of a buffalo robe that recorded a battle fought by the Mandans and Hidatsas against the allied forces of the Arikaras and Sioux.⁷ These examples show stylistic characteristics similar to those seen in rock painting. There is no attempt to treat the hide as a unit, nor are the figures portrayed realistically. Human figures are triangular or rectangular with narrow waists and straight or slightly bent legs. The heads are circular with no features, although hair styles may be indicated. Within a very short time, however, this "stick-figure" approach was abandoned in favor of greater accuracy and detail.⁸

Euro-American traders and artists were responsible for introducing new media, new colors, new tools, and European concepts of perspective and realism. Karl Bodmer, a Swiss artist who accompanied Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied up the Missouri in 1832, made a copy of one of Chief Mato-Topé's painted robes that showed some war exploits of the chief. This robe illustrates the changes that had taken place in the years between Lewis and Clark and Maximilian. Mato-Topé and other men are distinguished by details of clothing, body paint, blood, weapons, and other items. The figures are fleshed out, although the hide is still not treated as a unit; the various events are done as a series of vignettes; and there is still little concern with perspective.⁹

Tribal differences have also been noted in figurative designs used on tipis. All tribes ornamented their tipis with animals symbolic of supernatural guidance and protection. Unfortunately, few examples of these sacred, ornamented tipis have survived. The best known are from the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache

tribes of Oklahoma and the Blackfeet of Montana; animal figures relating to the spirit guardian of the tipi owner occur most frequently on tipis that have painted areas along the bottom and top. Among the Kiowa, these areas are usually solid colors or simple stripes, while the Blackfeet used compositions of geometric designs. The Kiowa animal figures are set on the upper edge of the colored area, while the Blackfeet more often centered their figures in the light-colored space between the top and bottom bands.¹⁰

With the extermination of the buffalo and the military success of the U.S. Army, the old way of life was permanently altered. Many tribes were resettled on reservations, some far from their original homeland. Along with the reservations came traders' stores and a cash economy, the distribution of rations and annuities, and the influence of missionaries and educators. Bound books of lined and numbered pages, used by army men, traders, and others, were bought or picked up on battlefields or received as gifts by Indian men, who used them to make a visual record of a way of life that was gone forever. These paintings and drawings, done primarily by Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Sioux men, are known as ledger or sketchbook art and represent a transition from tribal to modern art. These sketchbooks have been studied as records of individual and tribal histories and as examples of the last "true" Indian art, but little attention has been given to the paintings in terms of stylistic analysis. A brief comparison of the Sioux paintings with Kiowa ledger art suggests that the Sioux were more likely to depict large action scenes, particularly battles, and to run the action off the edge of the paper, than were the Kiowas. Kiowa paintings more often illustrate a single event, with emphasis on the details of dress and environment, while the Sioux often show multiple events on the same page. Sioux painting tends to be less concerned with details than the southern plains ledger painting.¹¹

Many of these pieces were made for non-Indian purchasers, including army men who were stationed at the various forts on the

central plains, anthropologists who found the Plains Indian culture worthy of preservation, and officials from the Bureau of Indian Affairs who promoted art work as a way for Indians to earn money. The practice of selling their work represented a real change from the production and utilization of painting by the members of a tribe. No longer was the artist free to paint as he felt or to describe his supernatural or mystic experience; now he was painting to satisfy the needs of an alien audience. Among the elements these artists carried over from traditional painting were a naive approach to perspective, the use of symbols to depict movement, and little concern with facial features or background details. A major change, however, was an emphasis on identification and recognition of individual artists. In tribal society, the artist was known and there was no need to sign or otherwise identify a work, but when non-Indians wanted to know who the artist was and learn his tribal origin, a painting was likely to be signed or marked with a symbol that identified a specific creator—the beginning of individualism in Indian painting. From its inception in the interest and support of the white patrons of these artists, the modern practice of studio or easel painting developed in a variety of ways among Indians in different parts of the plains.

Trends in modern Plains Indian painting appear to reflect regional differences between artists of the southern, central, western, and Canadian plains.¹² The suggestion that these regions may be identified with different styles of painting should not be taken as conclusive, because much more attention needs to be given to the study of contemporary Plains Indian art before the parameters of the styles can be definitively established. Inevitably, the work of artists within a particular region shows individual variations, and artists also change their styles over time. On the regional or local level, however, the pressures to produce a work within a certain style in order to be acceptable to one's peers or to consumers can override a desire for individuality. For example, one local Sioux artist whose work was almost rejected from an Indian art show because it did not have



FIG. 1. *Doc Tate Nevaquaya (Comanche), Straight Dancer, 1971; watercolor on illustration board, 14 x 19 in. Private collection.*

an obviously Indian theme now paints traditional culture or symbolic pieces that are much more acceptable. Another factor in maintaining regionalism is that many local artists are totally or partially self-taught and they paint in the manner of others around them.

INDIAN ART OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS

The southern plains are the locus of the so-called Oklahoma style of Indian art.¹³ This realistic, two-dimensional style is reminiscent of illustration techniques; heavy outlines define blocks of flat colors that have no textural or tonal variations. With some exceptions, paintings in this mode tend to be small in size, and there is little concern for perspective or back-

ground details. Characteristically, the figures do not fill the canvas, although they are intricately detailed and busy, which gives the viewer a sense of being removed from the scene. The medium is usually watercolor or tempera in pale or muted tones on cardboard, often on a background of colored illustration or mat board (Fig. 1).

The content of Oklahoma style painting is a romanticized tribal culture; dancers, warriors, and ceremonies are typical subjects. Most Indian artists of the southern plains have followed this trend, even those whose origins are outside the region. Some artists, like Fred Beaver, Enoch Haney, and Jerome Tiger, who are descended from tribes originating in the Southeast, have chosen to depict the way of life and events in the history of their own people, but others of the same background have adopted the more common themes from plains culture. All of these paintings are similar in that humans are the primary subject matter. Rarely is the content of southern plains paintings totally symbolic or abstract.

Many paintings with strong symbolic meanings are associated with the Native American Church, or peyote religion, which began in Oklahoma and to which Oklahoma Indians have maintained a strong commitment (Fig. 2). Numerous symbols, including the tipi, the waterbird, the waterdrum, the feather fan, the crescent, and the staff, are associated with the church. Many artists utilize them in their work, although symbolism is not as popular a subject as dancers and warriors. The development of peyote paintings in Oklahoma and some parts of the Southwest is probably due to the work of Monroe Tsatoke, a Kiowa artist who published a small book, illustrated by his paintings, on peyote.¹⁴ The success of the book and of Tsatoke's other peyote paintings probably stimulated other artists in the area to employ the symbols of the Native American Church in their work. Another reason for the localization of peyote art may lie in negative attitudes expressed by the missionaries who served the central and northern plains.

The Oklahoma style is part of a tradition



FIG. 2. *Robbie McMurtry Aquasu (Comanche)*, Peyote Painting, 1971; tempera on illustration board, 14 x 18 in. Private collection.

that extends from Oklahoma westward into New Mexico and Arizona. In the 1920s five Kiowa men—Steve Mopope, Monroe Tsatoke, Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, and Jack Hokeah—were admitted to the University of Oklahoma for art instruction.¹⁵ The university teachers of these students encouraged them to develop an “Indian” style based on the ledger and earlier forms. This became the “Oklahoma,” or “traditional,” style. A similar school of art developed in the Studio at Santa Fe and was later taught at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Few artists from places other than Oklahoma and the Southwest attended these schools. Dorothy Dunn mentions only Oscar Howe, Wilmer Dupree, Oscar Bear Runner, Tony Guerue, Dan Quiver, Calvin Tyndall, Victor Pepion, and Calvin Larvie as plains scholars who came from areas outside the

southern plains to study at her school.¹⁶ The success of the Kiowa and southwestern artists has maintained and refined the traditional manner of painting to its present form. Many self-taught artists continue to use this mode in works produced for traders and local art galleries.

Although there is no doubt that the southern plains style originated through non-Indian influence, it also has strong roots in tribal culture. The Kiowa artists and the others who followed their lead had been introduced to traditional painting techniques by their relatives, and they had seen the ledger books done by men who were imprisoned at Fort Marion in Saint Augustine, Florida, as punishment for their part in raids on white settlements. In addition, traditional painting is reminiscent of the delicate beadwork done by Kiowa and Comanche women. Thus the appeal of the Oklahoma style and its popularity among southern plains artists may be due in part to its echoes of traditional aesthetic ideals.

White patrons have also contributed to the popularity of southern plains painting by providing a market for the work. Tourist demands support a large number of painters who sell their work through galleries and shops, and these have helped to maintain the Oklahoma form. Until 1959 the Annual National Exhibition of American Indian Painting, sponsored by the Philbrook Art Institute, rejected any paintings that were not done in the flat, two-dimensional, traditional technique, including works by Patrick Desjarlait (Chippewa) and Oscar Howe (Yanktonai).¹⁷ Winners in the contest received prestige and cash prizes; thus, by controlling the art style and rewarding those who were most accomplished in it, the museum helped to foster the development of regional differences.

Current trends in southern plains Indian painting are toward greater diversity in style and content. Some of the younger artists have studied at the Institute of Indian Arts in Santa Fe, where they have been exposed to a wide variety of techniques and media. These artists, however, continue to focus on the human

figure and on traditional culture as subject matter. Parker Boydiddle, Kiowa, who has painted in the traditional two-dimensional style, also paints in western style. Bennie Buffalo has moved away from the typical southern plains style into modern painting. Some artists have pushed the Oklahoma style in new directions while retaining the basic idiom. Backgrounds have been added, more figures are included, and some of the work has taken on a mystical theme. Elements of mysticism are prominent, for example, in the paintings of Enoch Haney, Gary White Deer, Bert Seabourn, Mirac Creepingbear, and Sherman Chaddlesone. This trend may represent the younger artist's interest in traditional Indian religion and values, which is experiencing a renaissance on the plains, or it may reflect a recognition that knowledge of the past is disappearing into a mythical dream world that can be known only vaguely to young Indians. Also new in Indian art is the rise of Indian women artists. When Lois Smoky was admitted to the University of Oklahoma program with the Kiowa men in 1927, she broke numerous taboos surrounding the role of Indian women as artists. She later stopped painting, partly because of pressure from traditional members of the tribe, but her lead made it possible for other women to achieve success in painting.¹⁸ Today, Jean Bales, Jean Hill, Virginia Stroud, Ruthe Blalock Jones, Blanche Wahney, and many others are being acclaimed as artists of great talent and originality.

TRENDS IN THE ART OF THE CENTRAL PLAINS

The central plains style, which has also been called "Sioux" style as practiced by people of Sioux, Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Turtle Mountain Chippewa descent, ranges from realistic western landscapes to abstract symbolic works.¹⁹ Although there appears to be less homogeneity in paintings of the central plains, it is possible to identify some basic characteristics that distinguish the art of this region from southern plains work. In contrast to the refined

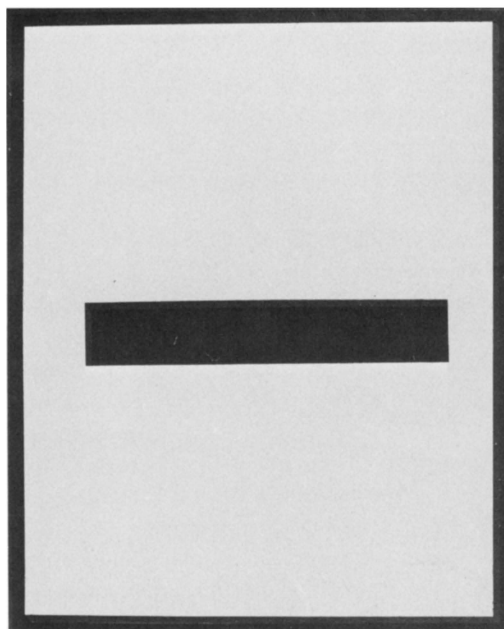
mannerisms of the southern plains, central plains work tends to be vigorous and dramatic, employing a vivid palette, heavy contrasts, and textured surfaces. The usual medium is oil or acrylic on canvas, masonite, or other sturdy surfaces, although mixed media and collages are also seen. Ordinarily, the canvas is filled from edge to edge by the picture, which sometimes appears to continue beyond the edge of the canvas—a technique that actively involves the viewer in the work. Humans are the dominant subjects, but they are more often placed in a larger setting or form part of an elaborately conceived central motif, illustrated here by the work of Yanktonai Sioux artist Oscar Howe (Fig. 3). Howe has achieved an international reputation as an Indian artist. Traces of the flat, two-dimensional, traditional southern plains style in which he was trained are apparent in his work, but he developed an individual approach employing elements of cubism that more nearly reflects his tribal heritage. The shades of red, yellow, and blue-black and the geometric forms that he often uses in his paintings can be related to the colors and geometry of Sioux beadwork.²⁰

Native artists of North and South Dakota utilize two major themes: the traditional lifestyle and traditional religion. Most of the artists paint scenes of everyday activities of tribal times; camps, village scenes, buffalo hunting, moving camp, butchering buffalo, tanning hides, and warfare are popular themes. Rennard Strickland notes that only one painting in the Philbrook collection of Indian art has a theme of Indian-white conflict, a situation that contrasts highly with the art of the central plains, where Indian heroes, battles, and the demoralizing impact of white culture are common topics.²¹ The influence of the landscape is apparent in the work of Arthur Amiotte and other artists of the region who have produced abstract or impressionistic paintings of central plains geomorphology. To the Sioux, presently engaged in a legal battle for the return of the sacred Black Hills, the land remains an important physical force. Amiotte and others have also been influenced by traditional media—



FIG. 3 (above). Oscar Howe (Sioux), *Woman Seed Player*, 1974; casein on paper, 34 x 31 in. Courtesy of the University of South Dakota, Vermillion. FIG. 4 (lower right). Donald Montileaux (Sioux), *Leggings Design*, 1969; oil on canvas, 27 x 40 in. Indian Arts and Crafts Board Collection; photograph courtesy of Sioux Indian Museum and Crafts Center.

beads, paint, hide, and fur—and create hard-edge geometric designs (Fig. 4) or make collages using them as subjects. More recently, Amiotte has turned to rock art as inspiration for a series of works dealing with traditional religious beliefs. In comparison with other regions, the Indian art of the central plains reveals a greater emphasis on objects, more abstract art, and more frequent use of religious themes, particularly the circle, feathers, eagles, pipes, and smoking. Symbolic paintings have become more popular in recent years as younger artists return to traditional teachings or seek to understand their Indian heritage.²²



The origins of the central plains style are varied and complex, and can be related to the beadwork of the region, to hide and ledger paintings, and to non-Indian influences as well. The presence of Indian artists such as Oscar Howe is also a significant factor. At the University of South Dakota, Howe not only taught art classes but held a special session each summer for Indian artists. The non-Indian influences on the art of the region may be traced to a variety of sources. The Catholic church strongly encouraged painting, and still sponsors the Red Cloud Indian Art Show each summer, but it has been more interested in content than in style. Between 1879 and 1918, many young Indian men and women went to Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where some were exposed to the grandiose landscape paintings of the Rocky Mountain School and other Euro-American painting styles. One of these men, Moses Stranger Horse, achieved success in this style and encouraged others to follow his example; his work has influenced present-day "western" painters.²³ Historical events have made a strong impact on the Sioux, and these also provide subject matter for paintings. Indian battles such as the Little Big Horn and Indian leaders, especially Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud, have served as reminders of days when the Sioux were strong and bold. Wounded Knee constantly reminds Indians of their mistreatment by whites. Paintings treating these events have been well received by Sioux purchasers and are appreciated by non-Indian collectors as well.

One of the newer trends in Native American painting is social commentary. Growing out of the civil rights movement of the late 1960s and early '70s and heavily influenced by the Wounded Knee crisis of 1973, the trend is supported today by the work of the Institute of Indian Arts in Santa Fe. Social commentary art focuses on the theme of injustices done to Indians by whites. In the central plains, some artists have attacked the stereotype of the tribal Indian, as presented in many paintings, by making realistic scenes of contemporary Indian life, showing abandoned cars, dilapidated

houses, and sad people. Other artists have concentrated on civil rights issues; in representing Indians as victims, they often depict persons who have become symbols of white oppression to Native Americans. In *Indian Pain*, shown in an exhibition at the Sioux Indian Museum in 1974, Donald Montileaux uses the case of Yellow Thunder, beaten to death by white men, to make a statement about Indian rights and the legal issues that eventually culminated in the confrontation at Wounded Knee in 1973.²⁴

Another trend that is emerging in the central plains is the participation of Indian women artists. Until recently, women were involved with beadwork, quillwork, quilt making, and other traditional arts, but painting was considered a masculine art form. Indian women from this area have not yet achieved national acclaim for painting as they have for other arts, but young women are beginning to submit their work to art shows and will undoubtedly serve as role models for others.

INDIAN PAINTING IN THE WESTERN STYLE

"Western" style painting (Fig. 5) is less regional than other styles. Although it tends to be most common in Montana, Wyoming, and the northwestern plains, it also occurs in the central and Canadian plains.²⁵ Western painting also differs from the other regional Indian styles in that it is part of a distinctive school of American art. Recent followers of the school have focused on cowboy and Indian life, usually in realistic and historically accurate action scenes, and for this reason the style is also known as "cowboy" art.

Native Americans who follow the western tradition produce realistic, panoramic paintings in which scenery and background details almost dominate the human subjects, and the influence of nature, particularly the mountains, prevails. Even for a western artist like King Kuka (Blackfoot), who most often paints watercolors of Indians engaged in traditional activities, the mountains are a source of inspiration.²⁶ Oil on canvas is the preferred medium,



FIG. 5. *Raymond Arrow (Sioux), How Koda (Salute to the Traders), 1972; oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in. Indian Arts and Crafts Board Collection; photograph courtesy of Sioux Indian Museum and Crafts Center.*

although sculpture and pen and ink drawings are also part of the western tradition; many Indian artists work in several different media. The realism of western painting demands attention to detail, but without intrusive and jarring aspects of daily life. Most of the paintings tell a story, and many artists provide descriptions of the activities represented in a work. Although most artists attempt to be as realistic as paint will allow, some have adopted impressionistic techniques in order to deal with the minute variations in the natural environment. Prairie grass takes on orange, purple, and blue hues as well as more natural brown and greens; mountains are purple, turquoise, and green.

Male-oriented activities of the frontier provide the content of western-style painting. Once painted from experience but now historic, the material is based on scenes observed and

recalled or derived through research. Backgrounds are often painted from life or from photographs before the human figures in their historic activity are added. Some Indian artists have done pictures of traditional Indian life, particularly camp scenes, but much painting is devoted to hunting, fighting, trading, range work, and other masculine pursuits. Women, symbolism, and religious subjects are rare. The few Indian women artists from the northern plains have concentrated on landscapes or abstract art rather than western-style painting.

The origin of western-style painting can be traced directly to non-Indian influence. The artists who visited the northwestern plains and were captivated by its rugged grandeur and the active, masculine life-style of the region passed their enthusiasm on to their Indian friends. In search of historical accuracy, many artists

lived with Indian people or established homes or studios in Montana or Wyoming; some, like Winold Reiss at Glacier, established art schools in which young Indians received lessons. The railroads hired artists to paint pictures that would attract tourists, and the success of this endeavor led to the opening of art galleries and museums and created a market for paintings by Indians as well as non-Indians. One center of such activity was the Blackfoot reservation in Montana, where the establishment of the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning provided opportunities for artists to see art and to exhibit their own work. Victor Pepion, who painted murals for the museum, studied with Winold Reiss and attended art schools in California, Oklahoma, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Montana, studying various styles before settling on one that enabled him to relate traditional activities and art forms to modern media. Pepion's work, although not in the western tradition, encouraged many Blackfoot Indians to become artists—some in the western tradition and others, like Neil Parsons, following different trails.²⁷

One result of the increased interest in Indian art is that many young people attend art school, either at the Institute of Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, or in programs at state universities and colleges. These younger artists are exposed to many different styles of painting, and some, like Neil Parsons, have developed highly individual styles. However, western painting remains the preferred style among young artists of the region because of public demand, which seems to be growing rather than diminishing, and because of their interest in preserving traditional Indian culture. Artists such as Wilbur Black Weasel, Chuck No Runner, and William Daychild find it a satisfactory means of depicting past and present tribal life, although it demands great ability to visualize and requires research on the subject matter.²⁸ It is likely that western-style painting will continue to be popular in the northwestern plains for many years to come.

ART STYLES IN THE CANADIAN PLAINS

Canadian plains Indian painting is an emerging art with strong local differences. John Anson Warner has identified, particularly for Saskatchewan, a northern plains school characterized by realistic depiction of Indian life on Canadian reserves.²⁹ Another group of painters have employed abstract forms to express Indian values and beliefs, while still other artists paint in the western tradition. In the eastern part of the plains, Native Americans have adopted the commercially popular Algonkian legend painting that originated with Norval Morrisseau.³⁰

Although it remains within the framework of traditional Indian painting and bears a relationship to western painting, the northern plains style is distinctive in its emphasis on realism and accuracy (Fig. 6). Unlike western art, the paintings tend to be of average size and to portray the quiet, gentle life that once existed on Canadian reserves and prairie farms. The paintings are always representational, although slightly impressionistic, imparting the dreamlike, gentle quality for which the work is known. Somber tones with flecks of color and an absence of harsh contrasts add to the gentleness of the paintings. The subject matter is always life on the reserve—people at work, engaged in social events, relaxing, or sleeping. Although realism is strong in these paintings, the negative aspects of reservation life are presented in a positive way. The most acclaimed representative of this school is Allen Sapp, recently elected to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. A number of other young artists are following in his path.³¹

The western tradition on the Canadian plains, as in the United States, stems from the presence of non-Indian artists who employed the form to present the history and culture of the plains. One of the best known native painters in this manner was Gerald Tailfeathers (Fig. 7), who studied with Winold Reiss at his studio in Glacier Park. Tailfeathers achieved international renown, but he chose to live with



FIG. 6. *Allen Sapp (Cr e), Mary Nicotine and Her Little Dog; acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 in. Photograph courtesy of John Anson Warner/Allen Sapp Paintings.*

his tribe rather than give up his status and become a nontreaty Indian.³²

A third type of visual expression on the northern plains—a non-objective, abstract style—is very different from the others. The paintings done in this mode are devoted to presenting Indian beliefs and ideals rather than depicting activities or events. The leading representative of this movement is Alex Janvier, who, unlike most self-taught Canadian plains Indian artists, graduated from the Southern Alberta College of Art. Like expressionist paintings, Janvier's works have no focal point; he utilizes elements of cubism to make statements about man's relationships to man, to animals, and to the environment. His most abstract works are composed of radiating lines that twist, curve, and swirl across the canvas, forcing the eye to travel along the lines, to become involved in the painting, and eventually to realize how the parts are related to the whole. Large areas of

light-colored background provide a negative painting effect that causes the eye to move in and out of the painting. All of Janvier's work is marked by the use of circles, small and large, as exclamation points representing the circle of life, the relationship of all living creatures to each other and to the universe.³³ The late Sarain Stump carried Janvier's style of flowing lines in a different direction. Stump's work is more representational; it is possible to identify human faces, animals, and birds, although he still aims to present ideas rather than reality. Some of Stump's work has multiple focal points, which he uses to illustrate progression from one point to another. In Stump's paintings the colors are brighter and the contrasts heavier than in Janvier's. Some younger artists, such as Maxine Noel and Bob Bayer, also work in an abstract or semiabstract manner when it seems appropriate to move from genre painting to an expression of ideas and values.³⁴



FIG. 7. *Gerald Tailfeathers (Blood), On the Move, 1960; tempera on illustration board, 15 x 19 in. Courtesy of Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta.*

The origins of these diverse styles are related to the isolation of the Canadian reserves, the scant attention paid to Indian art, the status of Indian and government relations, traditional Indian cultures, and Canadian painting in general. Few of the native artists who are well known in Canadian art had formal training. Some were given basic instruction in the techniques of painting, but the various styles developed out of the artist's exposure to art and from what the artist wished to say in his work. Most of the Native Canadian artists have chosen to remain in their tribal society, because in Canada, giving up one's status as a treaty Indian means that one gives up legal claims to Indian identity, relinquishes all rights accorded to Indians, including living on the reserve, and determines forever the nontreaty status of his

or her descendants. Until recently, Indian status was not conducive to recognition as an artist. Both Alex Janvier and Allen Cree found it difficult to make a living in this way.

In Canada as in the United States, young Indian artists are being exposed to a wide variety of styles and are finding many more commercial outlets and greater acceptance of their work. Indians are attending art school in increasing numbers, some even going to Santa Fe to the Institute of Indian Arts, and art galleries that support exhibits and sell Indian art are becoming more numerous. Exhibitions of modern Indian art sponsored by the Canadian government have encouraged many young artists to paint.³⁵ One current trend appears to be toward multimedia works. Sarain Stump had begun to combine hide, sculptured forms,

and paint to create emotional statements about contemporary Indian life. The art program at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College teaches the use of a wide variety of locally available materials. It also appears that the popularity of the northern plains school will attract more followers. Abstract art should also become more popular as young Indians move toward expressing ideas rather than depicting a traditional culture they have not fully known.

SUMMARY

Plains Indian art is not a homogeneous body of work that is easily classified; rather, it comprises numerous styles that have developed out of the interaction of many variables. The southern plains region is known for a decorative style that features detailed figures set in two-dimensional space. The Sioux and other tribes of the central plains have employed an active, colorful style of painting to memorialize their history and traditional culture. Western painting also depicts Indians engaged in traditional activities, but emphasizes historical accuracy and realism. The northern plains school differs from other Indian art styles in its technique and its tendency to focus on more recent Indian culture, rather than attempting to immortalize a magnificent past. Another Canadian trend is the development of an abstract or semiabstract style of painting in which the principle themes are relationships between humans, the environment, and the unseen.

Among the variables that have influenced the evolution of these different styles are the education of the artists, the presence of non-Indian role models and teachers, the nature of institutional involvement in Indian art, geographical factors, traditional Indian art styles, historical events, and federal Indian policy. This article has begun to trace the impact of these variables on twentieth-century Plains Indian painting. A more detailed analysis of the art of each region will provide further clarification of the interaction of these influences and lead us closer to an understanding of the variety of styles in Plains Indian painting today.

NOTES

1. The classic works on Indian painting have generally ignored the central and northern plains. Dorothy Dunn, *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Areas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968) and J. J. Brody, *Indian Artists and White Patrons* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971) discuss tribal art styles from the plains and the development of modern painting in Oklahoma, but refer only briefly to contemporary paintings and artists from the other plains states and Canada.

2. Rosalind Constable, "The Vanishing Indian," *Art in America* 58 (January-February 1970): 45; Brody, *Indian Painters and White Patrons*, p. 187; Christian F. Feest, *Native Arts of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 15-16; John C. Ewers, "Plains Indian Painting: The History and Development of an American Art Form," *American West* 5 (March 1968): 14.

3. The reader interested in rock art should consult the many state archaeological journals and reports by archaeologists that describe the rock art of specific states or locations. Montana, Wyoming, and Texas are well known for the rock paintings found in their mountain and rugged areas. David Gebhard, "The Shield Motif in Plains Rock Art," *American Antiquity* 31 (July 1966): 721-31.

4. George Frison, *Prehistoric Hunters of the High Plains* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), p. 413; James D. Keyser and George C. Knight, "The Rock Art of Western Montana," *Plains Anthropologist* 21 (February 1976): 3.

5. Keyser and Knight, "Rock Art of Western Montana," pp. 9-10; David Gebhard, "Rock Art," in *American Indian Art: Form and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Gallery, 1972), p. 28.

6. Many authors have written about tribal differences in Plains Indian painting, usually in connection with a description of the traditional culture of a specific tribe. The works cited here will direct a reader to more specific sources. John C. Ewers, *Plains Indian Painting* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1939); Ted J. Brasser, "Plains Indian Art," in *American Indian Art: Form and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Gallery, 1972), p. 56; Father

Peter J. Powell, "Beauty for New Life: An Introduction to Cheyenne and Lakota Sacred Art," in *The Native American Heritage*, ed. by Evan M. Maurer (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1977), p. 33; Ted J. Brasser, "The Pedigree of the Hugging Bear Tipi in the Black-foot Camp," *American Indian Art Magazine* 5 (November 1979): 32; Gary Galante, "The Painter: The Sioux of the Great Plains," in *The Ancestors: Native Artisans of the Americas*, ed. by Anna Curtenius Roosevelt and James G. E. Smith (New York: Museum of the American Indian, 1979), p. 8.

7. *American Indian Art: Form and Tradition*, pp. 4, 132; Ewers, "Plains Indian Painting," p. 5.

8. Ewers, "Plains Indian Painting," p. 7; Howard D. Rodee, "The Stylistic Development of Plains Indian Painting and Its Relationship to Ledger Drawings," *Plains Anthropologist* 10 (November 1965): 222.

9. Davis Thomas and Karin Ronnefeldt, *People of the First Man* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), p. 220.

10. Brasser, "Pedigree of the Hugging Bear Tipi," p. 35; John C. Ewers, *Murals in the Round: Painted Tipis of the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978).

11. These comments are based on a comparison of the ledger paintings in Karen Petersen, *Plains Indian Art from Fort Marion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971) with paintings in Galante, "Sioux of the Great Plains," and in Leslie Tillett, *Wind on the Buffalo Grass* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976). Many other works on ledger and sketch-book art should be carefully studied in order to develop this idea further. These include Helen H. Blish, *A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967); Karen Petersen, *Howling Wolf: A Cheyenne Warrior's Graphic Interpretation of His People* (Palo Alto, Calif.: American West Pub. Co., 1968); Cohoe, *A Cheyenne Sketchbook* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964); Zo-Tom, *1877: Plains Indian Sketch Books of Zo-Tom and Howling Wolf* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1969); Father Peter J. Powell, *People of the Sacred Mountain* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

12. These divisions have been implicitly

recognized in the three publications on contemporary Plains Indian painting sponsored by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board. Rosemary Ellison, *Contemporary Southern Plains Indian Painting* (Anadarko, Okla.: Museum of the Southern Plains Indian, 1972); Myles Libhart, *Contemporary Sioux Painting* (Rapid City, S.D.: Sioux Indian Museum, 1970); Ramon Gonyea, *Contemporary Indian Artists: Montana, Wyoming, Idaho* (Browning, Mont.: Museum of the Plains Indian, 1972).

13. Brody, *Indian Painters and White Patrons*, pp. 175-87. This style has also been classified as "traditional Indian style" by such authors as Rennard Strickland, "The Changing World of Indian Painting and Philbrook Art Center," in *Native American Art at Philbrook* (Tulsa, Okla.: Philbrook Art Center, 1980), p. 12; Jamake Highwater, *Song from the Earth: American Indian Painting* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), p. 96; idem, *The Sweetgrass Lives On* (New York: Lippincott and Crowell, 1980), p. 24.

14. Monroe Tsatoke, *The Peyote Ritual* (San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1957).

15. Ellison, *Contemporary Southern Plains Indian Painting*, p. 18; Dunn, *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Areas*; Brody, *Indian Painters and White Patrons*, p. 120.

16. Dunn, *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Areas*, p. 358.

17. Strickland, "Changing World of Indian Painting," p. 13.

18. Jeanne O. Snodgrass, *American Indian Painters: A Biographical Directory* (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1968), p. 177.

19. Libhart, *Contemporary Sioux Painting*.

20. Robert Pennington, *Oscar Howe: Artist of the Sioux* (Sioux Falls, S.D.: Dakota Territory Centennial Commission, 1961).

21. Strickland, "Changing World of Indian Painting," p. 20.

22. *Paintings by Donald Montileaux* (Rapid City, S.D.: Sioux Indian Museum and Crafts Center, 1970); *Paintings and Wall Hangings by Donald Montileaux* (Rapid City, S.D.: Sioux Indian Museum and Crafts Center, 1974); *Wall Hangings by Arthur Amiotte* (Rapid City, S.D.: Sioux Indian Museum and Crafts Center, 1973). Other exhibition catalogs published by

the Sioux Indian Museum and Crafts Center provide a good survey of contemporary central plains Indian painting.

23. Libhart, *Contemporary Sioux Painting*, p. 20.

24. *Paintings and Wall Hangings by Donald Montileaux*.

25. Gonyea, *Contemporary Indian Artists*, p. 22.

26. Highwater, *Sweetgrass Lives On*, p. 130.

27. Dorothy Harmsen, *Harmsen's Western Americana* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1971).

28. *Paintings by Wilbur Black Weasel* (Browning, Mont.: Museum of the Plains Indian and Crafts Center, 1978); *Paintings and Ceramics by Chuck No Runner* (Browning, Mont.: Museum of the Plains Indian and Crafts Center, 1979); *Paintings by William Daychild* (Browning, Mont.: Museum of the Plains Indian and Crafts Center, 1979).

29. John Anson Warner, "Allen Sapp, Cree Painter," *American Indian Art Magazine* (Winter 1976): 40.

30. John Anson Warner, "Contemporary Algonkian Legend Painting," *American Indian*

Art Magazine (Summer 1978): 59-69, 76, 78-79.

31. John Anson Warner, "Allen Sapp," *Beaver* (Winter 1973): 4-8; idem, "Allen Sapp, Cree Painter"; John Anson Warner and Thecla Bradshaw, *A Cree Life: The Art of Allen Sapp* (Vancouver, B.C.: J. J. Douglas, 1977); John Anson Warner, "An Artist Remembers," *Beaver* (Summer 1980): 25-29; J. W. Grant MacEwan, "Allen Sapp: By Instinct a Painter," in *Portraits from the Plains* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Co. of Canada, 1971), pp. 280-87.

32. J. W. Grant MacEwan, "Tailfeathers, Blood Artist," in *Portraits from the Plains*, pp. 273-79; Nancy-Lou Patterson, *Canadian Native Art: Arts and Crafts of the Canadian Indians and Eskimos* (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan of Canada, 1973), pp. 83-85.

33. Olive Patricia Dickason, *Indian Arts in Canada* (Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1972), p. 95; Jacqueline Fry, "Treaty Numbers 23, 287, 1171," *Artscanada* 29 (Autumn 1972): 72-77.

34. "Sarain Stump," *Tawow* 4 (1974).

35. Kay Woods, "Art Amerindian Contemporary Tradition," *Artswest* (November 1981): 32-36.