

Native American Art and Abstract Expressionism

With the arrival of European immigrant artists during WWII and the emergence of Abstract Expressionism in the early 1940's, New York City became the center of the modern art world, replacing Paris. Often overlooked by Western art history, Native artists have been a vital aspect of the city's avant-garde art scene since the 1940's, and some of them actively contributed to Abstract Expressionism, also known as the New York School. Several New York School artists, including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Theodoros Stamos, were influenced by Native art, and in turn inspired American Indian artists. However, with a few exceptions, Native artists have rarely been treated as peers among the Abstract Expressionists.

Indigenous artists actively contributed to Abstract Expressionism and participated in exhibitions alongside with non-Native artists such as Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. **The Whitney Museum of American Art** included Leon Polk Smith (Cherokee, 1906-1996) and George Morrison (Chippewa, 1919-2000) in their 1952 *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*.

New York began to flourish as a Native art center during the 1940's and 1950's, when Native artists such as Leon Polk Smith and George Morrison had their studios in the city. **Leon Polk Smith** (Cherokee, 1906-1996), whose parents were one-half Cherokee, was born near Chickasha in Oklahoma when it was still Indian Territory. He grew up amongst Chickasaws and Choctaws, speaking Cherokee as his first language. In 1936, he moved to New York, where he was inspired by European Modernism, i.e. Piet Mondrian, Constructivism, and the city itself. He was especially fascinated by Mondrian's discovery of the interchangeability of form and space.¹ However, much of his work was also influenced by American Indian artistic traditions, such as Plains Indian geometric designs. Smith was considered one of the founders of Hard-edge painting, and became best known for his flatly painted geometric abstractions, which he began to develop in the early 1940's.

After trips to Europe and Santa Fe, NM, Smith moved to New York full time in 1944, and was among the most successful Native artists in New York. In 1945, he participated in Sidney Janis Gallery's exhibition, *Post Mondrian Painters*, which also included works by Josef Albers and Ilya Bolotowsky. His balance of color, form, and space inspired Ellsworth Kelly, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Indiana, who discussed the subject during their visits to Smith's studio in the mid-1950's.² He was also a mentor to artist and curator Lloyd R. Oxendine (Lumbee, 1942-2015). As early as the 1940s, Smith explored the curved line to free himself from the limitations of rectilinear shapes. Beginning in 1957, he created hard-edge paintings on shaped canvases—years before Ellsworth Kelly or anyone else did.³ In 1958, Smith had his first exhibition with the Betty Parsons Gallery and joined her influential roster of artists. During the early 1960's, Smith's reputation continued to grow with the rise of non-gestural forms of abstraction, including Color Field, Hard-edge, Op, and Minimalism. In 1965, he participated in MoMA's landmark exhibition, *The Responsive Eye*. A year later, art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway included Smith's work in *Systemic Painting* at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In the same year, he received the National Council of Art Award.⁴

George Morrison (Chippewa, 1919-2000) was born and raised on Minnesota's North Shore of Lake Superior. He graduated from the Minneapolis School of Art in 1943 with a scholarship to study at the famously innovative Art Students League (ASL) in New York City.⁵ During his years at ASL (1943 to 1946) Morrison merged Cubism, Expressionism, and Surrealism in his works. He remembered about his processes that "it was all very subconscious" and that a "dreamlike Surrealism [was] creeping in,"—in fact, his drawings from 1945 reveal that he was the first Native American artist to respond to Surrealism.⁶

Morrison matured artistically in the new Abstract Expressionist scene in New York in the mid-1940's. The style is known for its spontaneous and emotional approach to painting, which includes intuition, improvisation, and chance. This is also evident in Morrison's working process, which includes discovering forms and images while painting, and in the variety of moods and effects in his works. In 1946, his last year at the ASL, Morrison was included in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He also frequently exhibited in group shows with avant-garde artist friends such as Louise Nevelson at the Grand Central Art Galleries.⁷

In the mid-1940's Morrison began to create works in which biomorphic elements were fitted into linear patterns and grids that gave his compositions more structure, and often relied on Surrealist creative processes. Some of his organic forms suggested slopes, mounds, and serpentine bodies of water. In the late 1980's, Morrison recalled, "In those early years I was interested in the Cubist technique of breaking down landscape elements—a portion of land, water, or sky—into sections, and I still work that way."⁸ In 1954 he participated in an exhibition at the Tanager Gallery with Ad Reinhardt, Joan Mitchell, Robert Rauschenberg, and others.

In 1955, he moved to Greenwich Village, and spent time at the Village's legendary Cedar Tavern with artist friends Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Jackson Pollock. His paintings of that time consisted of spontaneously generated, thick impasto surfaces. He referred to Abstract Expressionist all-over compositions as "one-shot paintings," produced in a single session that might last all through the night.⁹ His focus on texture and the physical qualities of paint, as well as the aesthetic quality of his compositions, made him a successful member of the Abstract Expressionism movement, receiving positive critiques and exhibiting at major venues.¹⁰ He explained "This was my version of gestural painting, which the other Abstract Expressionists like Pollock and de Kooning were doing.... Movement of the paint became an integral part of the idea of painting. There might be a suggestion of subject matter... [but] the phenomenon of paint was what the painting was really about."¹¹ In 1957 Morrison had another solo exhibition at the Grand Central Moderns, from which the Whitney Museum of American Art acquired *The Antagonist* (1957).¹² A year later, Morrison was included in group exhibitions at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and an invitational at the Nonagon Gallery in New York along with the artists Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, and Milton Resnick. When his son, Briand Mesaba Morrison, was born in 1961, Franz Kline "elected himself Briand's godfather."¹³

Morrison was a key figure in New York's early Native art movement. Even though he mainly associated with non-Native artists at the beginning of his career, he later connected with other Native artists and writers, and exhibited at the American Indian Community House Gallery. He also didn't identify as an Indian artist in his early years: "I never played the role of being an Indian artist. I always just stated the fact that I was a painter and I happened to be Indian. I wasn't exploiting the idea of being Indian at all or using Indian themes But as my work became better known, some critics would pick up on my Indian background, and they'd make something of it. I guess they were looking for a way to understand my work."¹⁴ Morrison also commented, "Critics will refer to my Indian

background to try and make sense of the work, I wasn't pushing it, but they found it anyway."¹⁵ In fact, for years he was better known as an Abstract Expressionist than within American Indian art circles. His relationship to the land was essential to Morrison's identity. Even while he lived in New York, he was constantly drawn to the beaches and shoreline of Cape Cod and Provincetown—places that were similar to the views on Lake Superior. The results of his beachcombing for found wood and other natural materials were his monumental wood collages of the mid-1960s, which are among his major works, along with his abstract paintings inspired by Lake Superior and emphasizing the horizontal line.

While Polk and Morrison contributed to the New York School movement, its members in turn found inspiration in Native art. They explored Indigenous imagery, archaic symbolism, ancient universal mythology, and Surrealist ideas to free themselves from realism and to develop new aesthetic principles as a response to the tension-wracked post-WWII era.

Conclusion

Since the 1940's, New York has attracted and produced a wide variety of Native artists and art practices, each defined by their own artistic experiences. Native galleries and non-Native galleries, as well as museums, have been vital to the success of the New York modern Native art movement. Unlike other Native art movements, such as the Santa Fe, Northwest Coast, Oklahoma, or Plains Indian art scene, the New York movement often did not reference so-called "traditional" or customary Indian art. Instead, these artists used the visual language of the New York School. As Native artists gravitated toward New York, the exposure to avant-garde art gave them a new freedom of expression and liberated them from the expectations of the conservative Native art market and museums. Without these artists' willingness to take risks and experiment with new art processes, the high level of diversity in contemporary Native art could not have happened. In particular, Leon Polk Smith and George Morrison influenced generations of contemporary Native artists. These artists contributed to the development of the New York School and its successors with the introduction of the shaped canvas as a further development of Hard-edge painting (Smith) and thickly layered, textural compositions inspired by forms of nature and the unconscious (Morrison). The close examination of the pioneering works by Smith and Morrison also helps to correct the continued art-historical emphasis on Abstract Expressionism's artistic innovations at the expense of one of its sources of inspiration: Indigenous art.¹⁶

Even though Abstract Expressionists were interested in Indigenous art, they were not willing to have a dialog with Native artists; nor did they try to understand the Native art and culture they used as inspiration for their own works. Native and non-Native art were also not treated equally in exhibitions that featured both.¹⁷ Nevertheless, New York Native artists made an impact on the art world. For Native Abstract Expressionists, the Modernist period did not invent abstract imagery. However, the movement's experiments with abstraction did provide inspiration: Native artists explored intuitive expressions from their own art traditions, which manifested in geometric, expressionistic, and symbolic representations of shapes, forms, and colors.

Morrison and Smith were among the early Native artists who were active in the New York art scene. Decades later, other artists, including Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, G. Peter Jemison, and Lloyd R. Oxendine followed their example and presented their innovative work in SoHo and Chelsea galleries, curated shows, and wrote articles for art publications. They continued to contribute to New York as a major Indigenous art center and inspired a younger generation of artists including Brian Jungen, Kent Monkman, and Jeffrey Gibson.

Endnotes

¹ Smith explained, “three elements that have interested me most in art are: line, color, and the concept of space and its use as a positive force.” *Leon Polk Smith*, “Line, Color, and the Concept of Space,” in *Leon Polk Smith (Ludwigshafen am Rhein: Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, 1989)* 91.

²However, Ellsworth Kelly never directly acknowledged the influence. Martine, 64.

³ Leon Polk Smith explained in an interview, “Yes. And then the shaped canvases came in the late 1950s. And I don’t know anyone who had done shaped canvases before this either. So that helped to prepare the way for the 1960’s, not only Hard Edge but shaped canvases.” Leon Polk Smith in: “A Conversation Between Konstanze Churwell-Doertenbach and Leon Polk Smith.” *Nike* 19 (July/August/September 1987), accessed May 9, 2018, <http://leonpolksmithfoundation.org/life/interviews-with-the-artist/chruwell-doertenbach/> He painted on circular shaped canvases beginning in 1946. Ellsworth Kelly started working with irregularly angled canvases during the 1960s.

⁴ Later, Smith was represented by Eleanor Ward’s Stable Gallery and Washburn Gallery in New York. Leon Polk Smith Foundation, “Chronology,” accessed May 9, 2018, <http://leonpolksmithfoundation.org/life/chronology/>

⁵ Helen DeMott was one of his fellow students at ASL (1940s), and she was part of New York’s Indian Space Painters. Among the famous ASL alumni and instructors were avant-garde artists Mark Rothko (1925), Jackson Pollock (1929-1934), Lee Krasner (1928-32), Louise Nevelson (1933), Hans Hofmann (1930-1933), Will Barnet (1931-1946) and Theodoros Stamos (1955).

⁶ Morrison visited the 57th Street galleries, where he saw surrealist works of Arshile Gorky and other artists he admired. George Morrison and Margot Fortunato Galt, *Turning the Feather Around: My Life in Art* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1998), 63.

⁷ His friendship to Louise Nevelson, and the knowledge of her wood assemblages from the 1950s and 1960s, might have inspired him to create his large wood collages. He began experimenting with driftwood collages while summering on the Atlantic shore at Provincetown in 1965.

⁸ Kristin Makhholm and W. Jackson Rushing, *Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ In 1945, *Art News* commented “Morrison seemed most at home with this medium” and his *Driftwood* (1947), received special mention in a *New York Times* review in 1947. From 1947-1952 he regularly participated in the Whitney Museum of American art’s Annual Exhibition. *Ibid.*, 151-152.

¹¹ Morrison, *Turning the Feather Around*, 101.

¹² The same year he participated in a show with Leon Polk Smith, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and others at the James Gallery in New York. Makhholm, 20, 155

¹³ Morrison, *Turning the Feather Around*, 116. Morrison’s *Red Painting* (ca. 1960), sometimes subtitled *Franz Kline* Painting, once hung in Kline’s home as part of an artists’ trade that was never consummated due to Kline’s sudden death. *Ibid.*, 117-118.

¹⁴ Gerald Vizenor, “George Morrison: Anishinaabe Expressionism at Red Rock,” in *Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser*, edited by Truman Lowe, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2004) p. 44.

¹⁵ Morrison, *Turning the Feather Around*, 81.

¹⁶ Art critic Clement Greenberg claimed that Abstract Expressionism was the first great American school of modernist art, while denying the movement’s artists referenced Indigenous art and culture. Martine, 22.

¹⁷ Thomas McEvillery, *Art & Otherness: Crisis Cultural Identity* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co., 1992), 46.