

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART

THE ANSCHUTZ COLLECTION



Fritz Scholder
An American Portrait
1979

Notice details in the painting to identify the individual:

- Feathers
- Ponytail/braid/long hair
- Kerchief/bandana
- American flag
- Set jaw and profiled nose
- Leather/fringe?
- The artist has simplified the background and painted a pink slash mark through the middle of the figure, which further obscures his/her identity

Background Information:

- Born in Breckenridge, MN in 1937, Scholder grew up in North and South Dakota.
- On one side his grandmother was Indian; the other side was Euro-American; immigrants who made their way to California in search of gold.

- His father belonged to the Luiseño tribe (a California Mission tribe) in California and later worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.
- When the family moved to South Dakota in the early 1950s, Scholder received his first art training from the Sioux painter, Oscar Howe.
- Scholder did not embrace his Native American heritage at first, repeatedly asserting that he was not an Indian, and that he would not paint Indians as it had already been over-done and over-analyzed.
- Scholder began his Indian series in 1967, around the same time as many other major Indian rights events, including the American Indian Movement's takeover of Alcatraz in 1969, the occupation of the BIA headquarters in Washington in 1972, and the standoff with the federal government at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973.
- Although Scholder never publicly aligned himself with the American Indian Movement, his viewers are left wondering if the intense, vibrating color is activist in intention.
- Fritz Scholder "popped the balloon" in 1969 when he painted *Indian with Beer Can*, or the first 'real' Native American portrait.
- With paintings like this, Scholder revitalized "Indian art," forging a unique amalgamation of Expressionism, Color Field, and Pop art to convey his singular take on the experience of the modern American Indian, about which one critic said he "broke the mold."
- In the late 1950s Scholder studied at Sacramento City College with the celebrated Bay Area artist Wayne Thiebaud, who exposed him to the Pop art movement and also arranged his first solo exhibition.
- At a time when Native American art was dominated by romantic portrayals of the stoic and invariably head-dressed Indian Brave, Scholder imagined the Native American subjects of his paintings with cigarettes, beer cans, and dark glasses, in pickup trucks and blue jeans.
- Why are Native Americans so often portrayed as romantic, stoic, noble savages? How did they achieve such mythical status as a spiritual icon of Americana, when the reality of their experience at the hands of European settlers was so very different?

Quotes/Additional Primary Sources:

"I succumbed to a subject that I vowed I would never paint: the American Indian. The subject was loaded, but here I was in Santa Fe. It was hard not to be seduced by the Indian."

--Fritz Scholder, 1982

(<http://denverartmuseum.org/article/dams-new-exhibition-highlights-native-artist-fritz-scholder>)

"I'm one-quarter Indian, one-quarter German, one-quarter French, and one-quarter English, and in a way that is what my painting is. I truly believe that if someone is going to reach a point of expressing himself he has to find out who he is and accept it. I consider myself a painter. I'm happy that I seem to have influenced a few Indian painters. I'm also glad that I'm part Indian. But what I most want is to be known as a painter. I revel in the fact that I'm a painter and that I'm able to live and function on my work and do exactly what I want."

--Fritz Scholder, 1976

(<http://denverartmuseum.org/article/dams-new-exhibition-highlights-native-artist-fritz-scholder>)

"People don't really like Indians. Oh, they like their own conceptions of the Indian—usually the Plains Indian, romantic and noble and handsome and somehow the embodiment of wisdom and patience. But

Indians in America are usually poor, sometimes derelicts outside the value system, living in uncomfortable surroundings. We have really been viewed as something other than human beings by the larger society. The Indian of reality is a paradox—a monster to himself and a non-person to society.”

--Fritz Scholder, 1973

(<http://www.artcyclopedia.com/feature-indian-not-indian.html>)