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Author
Stolte, Sarah Anne

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Hustling and Hoaxing: Institutions, Modern Styles, and Yeffe Kimball's "Native" Art

Sarah Anne Stolte

In Yeffe Kimball's (1906–1978) *Self-Portrait* (1978), a white horse dominates the picture plane of a large canvas.[1] What appears to be the body of a male rider in traditional Plains Indian regalia, including a feather bonnet with ermine tails and a breastplate, guides the horse, who gazes directly at the viewer, drawing attention to its elaborately beaded mask. The horse and rider gallop across an abstract background suggestive of a horizon where earth meets a night sky lit by a full moon. Kimball's striking combination of abstraction and meticulous attention to specific elements of American Indian traditional material culture in her paintings was her signature style, one that folded expertly into existing frames of reference that were deemed acceptable, at least during her long career in the arts. Her choice to use the iconic image of a male Plains Indian on horseback in her "self-portrait" demonstrates her ability to harness existing gender and racial structures in American art. That she created this canvas in the last year of her life also suggests her personal affinity for the American Indian identity she assumed.

Yeffe Kimball's "Native" identity was invoked as recently as a few years ago. On October 5, 2017, *Art in America* republished online a 1972 article titled "23 Contemporary Indian Artists."[2] The author, Lloyd Oxendine, a member of the Lumbee tribe, had convinced the editors to publish a special edition of *Art in America* that focused solely on contemporary Native American art. His essay essentially offers a brief historiography of the interjection of American Indian arts into the canon of American art. He notes that modern American Indian art was not considered authentic or valuable by non-Natives unless it contained some reference to traditional

Sarah Anne Stolte is a lecturer of Art History at Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin. She earned a PhD in Art History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2019.

American Indian forms, but that this perception was changing. Since the 1960s, argues Oxendine, access to education in the arts had expanded for American Indian artists. The Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, under the directorship of Lloyd Kiva New, began to offer art courses in traditional and non-traditional art forms. Both of these forms, according to Oxendine's analysis, represent American Indian art of the 1970s and later. Placing Kimball's work in a hybrid model, Oxendine sees it as linking traditional American Indian cosmology with modern experiences shaped by colonial history. Highlighting Kimball's painting *Comanche–Brave Horse* (1971), for example, he describes the work as "Totemic but ghostlike, it suggests the frozen march of time across which the modern Indian must view his once vital link to nature through magic. At the same time, it is reminiscent of the mounted animal heads used by white men to decorate their dens—a suggestion, perhaps, of the positions to which Indian culture has been relegated by white society."[3]

Although Kimball consistently stated she was born in a prairie dugout in Kiowa Country, Oklahoma, to an Osage father and a white mother, Kimball was not American Indian. A very brief note is included in the 2017 reprint version of Oxendine's article stating that the Native heritage of two of the artists included in the original 1972 article was subsequently disputed: not only Yeffe Kimball, but also Wayne Eagleboy, who claims to be half Onondaga. The practice of posing as an American Indian artist continues to this day. To convince others that she was of American Indian ancestry, Kimball needed only to culturally appear as such, an appearance that relied heavily on notions of assimilation, conventional narratives, and romanticized, Eurocentric understandings of American Indians as belonging to a monolithic culture.

Equally important was that the larger social body in the arts world did not question her performance. Kimball utilized personal rapport and social graces to help her enter powerful arts institutions of her time. Letters she wrote to museum directors and gallery owners are amiable and genial; sometimes they include poems, and often greetings to extended family members of the addressee. Her ability to develop personal acquaintances with non-Native museum directors and gallery owners gave her the power to assume a false identity without raising questions. Because the arts continue to be prone to placing importance on developing personal connections, relying on personal rapport continues to put American Indian artists at a disadvantage, as most major institutions of the arts are run largely by non-Native directors, curators, and donors who are unversed in contemporary American Indian politics and identities. While it seems some were aware that Kimball was posing, she was not asked to verify her heritage.

Kimball passed away on April 12, 1978, resting peacefully at her vacation home in Santa Fe. Surrounded by and eulogized by Native elders and leaders including George Morrison, Lloyd Kiva New, and Will Rogers, Jr., Kimball was praised for her tireless activist efforts on behalf of Native peoples. In a memorial dedicated to Kimball, Cochiti artist Joe Herrera stated, "Her graciousness to help anyone at anytime can well and vividly be recalled. Her untiring efforts during crucial times meant a great deal to many of us and especially to our elders . . . We consider Yeffee a part of our Pueblo people's progress and satisfying results. All of us would like to be living memorials of her beautiful example, who though dead yet speaks."[4] Her *Boston Globe* obituary

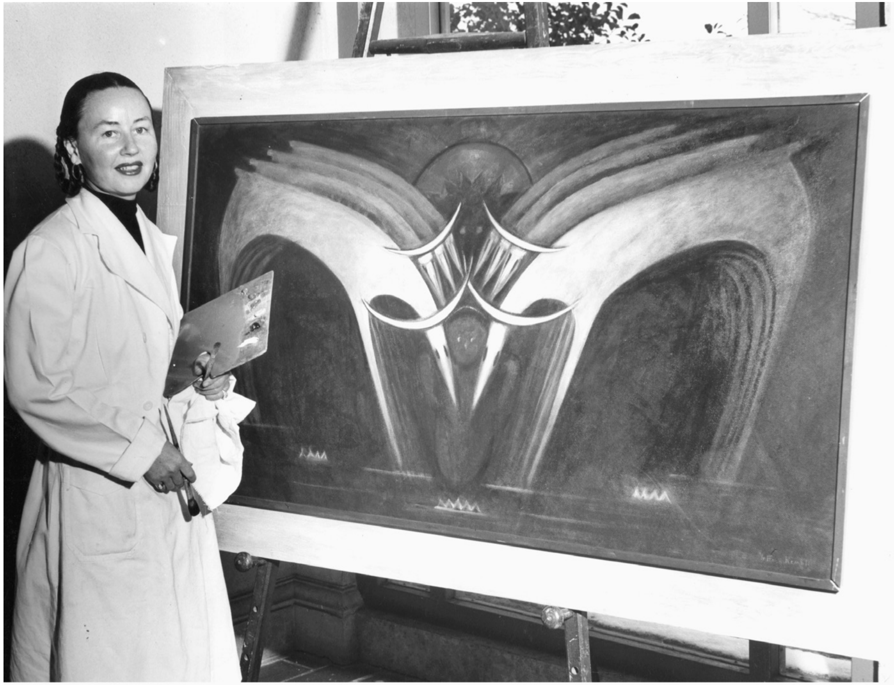

Figure 1: *Yeffe Kimball photographed with her painting* Manabozo and Friends (c. 1948). *Image courtesy of the Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Philbrook Museum of Art Archive, ARCH-1966.7.1.*

honors Kimball as "A pleasant, vital, woman, who wore her long gray-black hair in braids, she was both a thinker and doer, constantly seeking new avenues to explore both in her art and life. As an artist, she helped pioneer in the use of acrylic paints and was an innovator in utilization of the shaped canvas, whose concave and convex surfaces she filled with spatial abstractions, swirling with movement, flowing shapes and vibrant color."[5] These words of remembrance allow us to understand Kimball as an energetic, socially engaged, mover-and-shaker person with a passion for life and the gusto required to reach the highest levels of achievement in American arts. Her American Indian colleagues, likely aware that she was not of Osage heritage, remained unconcerned during her lifetime.[6] She was both a beloved philanthropist and crass self-achiever, a dichotomy in behavior made possible in part by her own charismatic, career-motivated vigor, but also because American culture embraced generalized misunderstandings and misrepresentations of American Indian peoples.

In this article, I examine the structural arenas within which Kimball's work circulated, including art schools and institutions, to argue that societal values of "Indianness" were rigidly defined in ways that benefited Kimball and harmed American Indian artists. Kimball's inclusion in numerous exhibits and publications on American Indian art evidences her success. In contrast, as art historian Cynthia Fowler's essay on

gender, modern art, and American Indian women painters emphasizes, the presence of American Indian women painters went unrecognized in the first half of the twentieth century, even at a time when American Indian art was gaining some recognition from East Coast art museums and positioning within the discourse of American modern art.[7] Through analysis and comparison, I illuminate the style, iconography, and subjects Kimball utilizes in her artwork that aided the launch of her career. Kimball decisively depicted masculine imagery and stereotypes that resonated with non-American Indian critics, judges, and gallerists of her time. As a self-identified "Osage" woman, she was not bound to histories of American Indian painting that emphasized documenting traditional dance and ceremony in a flat decorative style as taught by Dorothy Dunn from 1935 to 1937 at The Studio School at the Santa Fe Indian School. At the same time, her privilege as a white woman allowed her to establish rapport with crucial arts individuals. Together, her artistic choices and her social positioning contributed to the unique acclaim she achieved in an era when American Indian women painters were not receiving the recognition they deserved.

Style, Iconography, Subject

Kimball's personal interest in American Indian identities as subjects for her paintings is evident soon after her first years at the Art Students League, where she studied with established American artists George Bridgeman, William McNulty, and Jon Corbino.[8] Her early work, 1935–1940, includes figure drawings of nude females and dancers. Other sketches have poetic titles, such as *The Lovers* (ca. 1943), featuring two parrots sitting close together on a tree branch. Later, Kimball's signature, mature style masterfully engaged the formal elements of the European Modernist style she learned at the school and explored themes of American Indian life and culture. This combination was seen as revolutionary during her time.

In addition to studying at the Art Students League, Kimball has stated that she studied painting under Fernand Léger between 1940 and 1941 in Paris and in New York City. Léger passed through established foundational styles of European Modernism, working in Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Fauvism before emerging as one of the original Cubists between 1915 and the early 1920s. He navigated different informal groups and exhibition societies that constituted the Parisian avant-garde. His work and his Cubist inventiveness paralleled the styles of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque by 1910, but he soon developed his own style. Following his service in World War I, Léger's work took on an ordered style removed from Cubism and aligned with a return to the classical European tradition of painting. He began to explore the female nude as a subject, like many Parisian artists who had made a similar shift after the war.[9] During this exploration, Léger painted *Le Grand Déjeuner*, 1921–22, and developed his signature style, which he would later pass on to his students, including Kimball. Léger's style maintains allegiance to figurative subject matter and never delves into true abstraction. He combines machine-like forms with the classical, female nude.

Less rigid and mechanical, Kimball's work also maintains allegiance to figurative subject matter while exploring modernist techniques of color and form. Rather than subjects traditional to European art, such as the female nude, she emphasized American Indian themes. Kimball's work was recognized as "American Indian art" because of both her assumed background and her choice of subject matter. Kimball's explorations into American Indian subjects aligned with trends in European and non-American Indian modern art in which artists were looking away from "the art of imitation," as seen in works by Renaissance painters, and instead toward abstraction, constructive geometry, and the willful imposition of clear pattern, as seen in traditional works by many non-European artists.[10] Modern art, particularly in the United States, is not singularly a European "invention," but deeply entangled with works of non-European art and material culture. The New York artists of Kimball's era borrowed heavily from non-Western traditions, especially those of many different American Indian cultures.[11]

In "Art Against Primitivism: Richard Bell's Post-Aryanism," art historian Nicholas Thomas demonstrates how a European fascination with non-Western art styles led to the marginalization of Indigenous arts and "leads European audiences to reject Indigenous art that fails to conform to traditional styles."[12] Assumptions and expectations surrounding what authentic, non-Western art was "supposed" to look like stunted the success of many modern American Indian painters who broke from what was understood as "traditional Indian painting." Kimball, however, used these expectations to her advantage: she chose figurative painting over pure abstraction, incorporated representations of American Indian material culture into her work, and, rather than abstract reflections upon lived cultural knowledge, alluded to American Indian narratives through figurative imagery.

Her knowledge of American Indian cultures was rooted in scholarship. Kimball was an avid reader and researcher. Her personal library, donated to the Southern Plains Indian Museum in Anadarko, Oklahoma, included hundreds of books, magazines, and periodicals, primarily on American Indian subject matter. The volumes range from fiction, such as Bernard Sexton's *Gray Wolf Stories–Indian Mystery Stories*, to anthropological texts such as Franz Boas's *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, as well as books on modern European art including Jaime Sabartes's *Picasso, an Intimate Portrait* and Pierre Klossowski's translation of Goldscheider and Uhde's *Les Impressionnistes* (1937). Other notable titles from Kimball's private library include James Seaver's *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison The White Woman of the Genesee*, an account of Jemison's capture by members of the Seneca tribe in the 1750s.[13]

Kimball's 1948 painting *Manabozo and Friends* is a prime example of her artistic approach of combining modernist aesthetics with American Indian subject matter (fig. 1). With broad strokes of oil paint, she modernizes an image of the male hero of the title, borrowed from the Ojibwe. Because Kimball was depending upon a pan-Indian sensibility, her incorporated imagery was not always that of the cultural group she claimed. This diffuse adaptation of all things Indian indicates lack of engagement in her self-proclaimed Osage community. In this large work, two rows of abstract animals with delicately curving antlers, perhaps deer, dominate the picture plane and

recede into the distance. The front pair of animals each nestles a cheek on a kneeling figure that rests between them. The boy is Manabozo, a benevolent culture hero of the Anishinaabe tribes. In the distance, a geometrically formed sun rests beyond the rows of animals and seems to hover just above the figure's head. Stories about this individual vary between communities, but typically he is said to be born of the West Wind or of the Sun. His mother died when he was a baby and so the boy was raised by his grandmother. He is a trickster figure, but unlike many tricksters who model immoral behavior, Manabozo is a "virtuous hero and a dedicated friend and teacher of humanity."[14] Kimball's use of a large canvas and oil paint links the Indigenous culture hero to European styles of art making.

Old Medicine Man, a work awarded a prize in the Philbrook Annual of 1959 and subsequently purchased for the Philbrook museum's collection, also exemplifies Kimball's approach.[15] In 1949, Kimball had catalogued over six thousand art objects made by Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations people for the Portland Museum, which provided the influence for the imagery used in her later works. She combined this knowledge of First Nations art with the modernist painting techniques and styles she learned at the Art Students League, a combination that solidified her place in the history of nontraditional American Indian art. In this oil on board, Kimball depicts two figures, an elderly medicine man and another figure that looms mysteriously behind and to the right. The overall red-toned palette obfuscates shapes and forms, imbuing the work with a mystical quality. The masklike face of the second figure stoically gazes at the viewer with square lips, eyes, and nose reminiscent of a First Nations Northwest Coast totem carving. While less clearly outlined, this figure echoes the shape of the Medicine Man's face. The man's blanket, wrapped tightly around his body, is formed by interlocking geometric shapes. Though abstract, the blanket recalls the chilkat weaving practiced by Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and other Northwest Coast peoples. Traditional chilkat blankets are worn by high-ranking tribal members on civic and ceremonial occasions.

The Philbrook Annual is historically impactful and has shaped current understandings of American Indian modernism. Exhibiting artists, who submitted entries to the competitive exhibition via mail, participated in the hopes of achieving recognition—the exhibits often traveled through the United States, Latin America and Europe—and awarded artists received a cash prize. Art historians Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips have demonstrated the importance of the Philbrook Annual and its significance to modern era American Indian artists.[16] Bernard Frazier, Philbrook Museum director at this time, established the Annual with five main ideals: to acquaint the world with American Indian painting, to encourage the collection of American Indian painting, to maintain high standards through competent jurors, to document the records of American Indian life and cultures through traditional expressions, and to stimulate a renaissance of this expression by encouraging American Indian artists.[17] Not only was the Annual integral to furthering the careers of many artists, but the guidelines initially outlined by Frazier also shaped the styles of works the jurors selected, and hence exhibited. With submissions such as *The Old Medicine Man*, Kimball's awards for her participation in the Philbrook Annuals of Native American Art clearly evidence her success as an "American Indian painter."

Significance of Institutions and Art Schools

The Philbrook Art Center, now the Philbrook Museum of Art, was established in 1938 by oil baron Waite Phillips (1883–1964) and his wife Genevieve (1887–1979). To honor local culture and set itself apart from other museums, the Philbrook focused on American Indian art, relying on the Center's collections, which primarily consisted of Clark Field's 1942 gift of Indian crafts. The Center's grand opening included displays of traditional artifacts from various Plains tribes, as well as contemporary American Indian paintings loaned by University of Oklahoma art professor Oscar Jacobson and one of his students, Spencer Asah.[18] Noticing that contemporary American Indian paintings were receiving less attention than traditionally styled paintings and crafts in 1945, Frazier emphasized a wish for an annual exhibit of contemporary American Indian paintings, but insisted that these contemporary works maintain connections to traditions of the past. The Philbrook's director thus forwarded a contradiction in defining parameters for contemporary American Indian art that were based largely on non-Natives' assumptions. Indeed, in addition to the expectations for what qualified art as "authentically Native," Frazier's judgments reflected the high value of American Indian painting then being done at the Santa Fe Indian School Studio, which between 1932 and 1937 was directed by Dorothy Dunn, who influenced what some American Indian painters felt were restrictions to artistic production.[19] Dunn was one of a group of "anti-modern" white women philanthropists and teachers who navigated highly defined parameters of acceptable behaviors for white women in public and private realms.

Much scholarly attention has been given to this school. In *No Reservation: New York Contemporary Native American Art Movement*, artist and author David Martine notes that American Indian artists such as Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache), Oscar Howe (Yanktonai Dakota), and Joe Herrera (Cochiti/San Ildefonso) so disliked the Studio School style of instruction that they left to pursue their own artistic directions.[20] These new directions in American Indian painting—which frequently incorporated rendering in three dimensions rather than two, as well as various approaches to abstraction—were rejected by the Philbrook Annual judges in the early years when Kimball's figurative works were accepted. These rejections sparked controversy: in 1958, the judges deemed a painting by Oscar Howe too contemporary to be "Indian art." Howe subsequently criticized the panel for its narrow view and the Philbrook created non-traditional painting as a new category for the following Annual.[21]

Current understandings of modernism reveal systems of power and control that deserve critique. Women working in modernist styles in the early twentieth century, both Native and non-Native, have not been given their full merit of attention for shaping American modernism in the arts. Historian Margaret Jacobs and others argue that at the turn of the twentieth century, an upheaval in middle-class white Americans' views of proper gender roles and sexuality also influenced a change in white attitudes and policy toward American Indians.[22] Because women were typically seen as the moral guardians of the family in the last decades of the nineteenth century, white women in the early years of the twentieth could argue that they should have a more prominent role in enforcing public morality. Taking advantage of this position to push against

narrow, male-prescribed roles, some white women claimed that through activism in American Indian communities, they could play both public roles and maintain the "appropriate" connections to domestic realms. Many white women often looked to American Indian cultures not only to define an art for America that was unique from European trends, but also to shape their identities and roles in society that broke free from late-nineteenth-century ideals and gender norms of the recent past.

Kimball too became an avid supporter of American Indian causes. Her success as an artist allowed for increased visibility of modern American Indian arts and cultures. When she took on an Osage persona, her ideas of inclusion in this culture and community were of her own making. By the 1930s, many white Americans like Kimball had become intent on promoting their own vision of what it meant to be an American Indian and the dominant non-Native population's ideas and attitudes were defining perceptions about American Indian peoples and cultures. In other words, the social paradigm in which Kimball developed her persona and her artwork included acceptance of the dominant narratives, largely controlled by men, working in tandem with the marginalization of American Indian voices and perspectives. Kimball's identity appropriation served her personally, and extended and perpetuated patriarchy as well.

Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879–1962), a patron and considerable promoter of the visual arts in the United States from 1913 to 1947, similarly embraced American Indian cultures as inspiration for artists while in Taos, where she built an artists' mecca that some called the American equivalent to Greece or Rome. The Taos artists' residency became a site where the foundations of American art were explored and defined. The visiting artists combined the history of Western art traditions with their observations of Southwest American Indian arts, cultures, and traditions to firmly root their practices into the landscape and develop what they considered an original American art. As art historian Wanda Corn argues, although Luhan was like many visual artists of the time emphasizing form and aesthetics of American Indian arts over valuing and understanding cultural meanings, nonetheless her collection efforts brought national attention to bodies of work and artists who had little visibility, either in the Southwest or across the nation.[23]

A "mover and shaker," Luhan was a powerful force in promoting American Indian art in the United States. She frequently invited artists, musicians, and authors to her home and artists' sanctuary in Taos.[24] Both Luhan and Kimball supported the circulation of American Indian art because it served to define both American modernism and their own identities as cultural icons. After a visit to the Taos complex in 1947, Kimball was so impressed that she wrote to Luhan imploring her to donate her collection of "early Indian paintings" to the Philbrook Museum and highlighting the significance of its annual American Indian art exhibit. The first juried annual at the Philbrook Museum had been held between July 23 and September 29, 1946, and included an invited panel of three jurors: Potawatomi artist Woody Crumbo, non-American Indian artist Charles Banks Wilson, and American Indian art collector Clark Field.

Later Philbrook Annuals featured two or three judges, with one or two usually American Indian artists familiar with the cultural origins and contemporary practice

of the paintings. It is essential to add that almost all of these jurors were men. The rare exceptions include Willena Cartwright in 1955, Alice Marriott in 1958, and Clara Lee Tanner in 1959. In addition to being denied seats as jurors, women artists were equally unlikely to receive awards. In the annual's first ten years, the works of only five women received prizes. Among the five are two works included and awarded in 1947, the second year of the show, representing two out of fifteen total prizes. The Third Purchase Prize for the Woodland Region went to Jimalee Burton, a Cherokee/Cree woman from Oklahoma City, for *Buffalo Dance*; and the other went to Yeffe Kimball, for *To the Happy Hunting Ground*.[25]

Kimball's Peers: American Indian Women Artists

Jimalee Burton (1906–2000) studied painting in Oklahoma at the University of Tulsa with Alexander Hogue and later in Mexico with Carlos Mérida. Today, she is best known for her graphic drawings and a written work, *Indian Heritage, Indian Pride: Stories That Touched My Life*.[26] The abstract *Buffalo Dance* exemplifies Burton's painting style: spears emerge from tendrils of fire and diagonally cut across the picture plane, piercing a hide. A painted mask hovers in the distance as if witnessing the scene. The work powerfully evokes the Buffalo Dance, part of an annual ceremony in which male dancers imitate the movements of the buffalo, and also the drums, songs, and firelight that traditionally accompany the performance. Additionally, in reflecting Burton's training in American modern art in Tulsa and expressing tradition in a modernist visual language, the painting is a prime example of the new modern American Indian art for which Kimball had achieved fame. However, Kimball chose to enter the New York art scene of the late 1930s and mid-1940s to maintain her commitment to American institutions of art. Burton prioritized engagement with her own community instead. She spent much of her life in Tulsa and Sarasota, Florida, where she dedicated her life to creating a painted and written record of American Indian legends.

Although Oklahoma became the location of an influential school of American Indian painting during the early twentieth century, unfortunately issues of gender inequality at this school made a career as an artist more challenging for women, as in many other schools during this era. At the University of Oklahoma–Norman, Oscar Jacobson taught a group of young artists who would become known as the Kiowa Five—James Auchiah, Spencer Asah, Jack Hokeah, Stephen Mopope, and Monroe Tsatoke (who was also known as "Hunting Horse"). However, even though her work was included in most of the early exhibits of the group, the term "Kiowa Five" omits the sixth and only female among the six Kiowa artists who had come to Norman in response to Jacobson's invitation. In fact, her parents rented a large home in Norman in which all six Kiowa students lived for a time while they were at the school.

Lois Smoky has not been credited with the role she deserves in many histories of American Indian art and likely remains overlooked when the "Kiowa Five" artists are mentioned because she did not continue to pursue painting as a career. Smoky fought against resentment that she felt from her Kiowa colleagues, as it was customary among

the tribes of the Plains for women not to draw or paint in a representational style. When Smoky returned to the reservation after only a few short years of painting, she did not pursue a career in the art world, marrying and devoting herself to her husband and family.[27] Of course Yeffe Kimball, an outsider to traditional American Indian communities, did not face similar cultural pressures and was not marginalized in the same way as Smoky in pursuing her training and career.

Also during the early twentieth century, American Indian artists Acee Blue Eagle, Woody Crumbo, and Dick West Sr. began teaching Native students in the arts at the Indian School in Muskogee, Oklahoma, now Bacone Junior College. Artists Archie Blackowl, Fred Beaver, F. Blackbear Bosin, and Jerome Tiger emerged from this school. The established conventions of painting for American Indian peoples foregrounded by the Santa Fe Indian School Studio, developed by the students of Oscar Jacobson at the University of Oklahoma, and pursued at Bacone in Muskogee, met the standards of the Philbrook judges and were awarded cash prizes. Artists were categorized geographically, like much of the study of American Indian art. When the judges rejected her submission to the first Philbrook Annual, a painting titled *Sacred Buffalo*, Kimball had time to learn what types of works appealed to them. The judges felt that the small oil painting depicting a white buffalo, sacred to the Plains Indians, silhouetted against a dark and abstract night sky, lacked any "real Indian mood."[28] Significantly, although it was rejected from the Annual, *Sacred Buffalo* was exhibited in an adjacent gallery where works by the jurors were displayed, as well that of earlier American Indian painters such as Tsa-To-Ke, Ma-Pe-Wi, Mopope, and Mootzka. The decision to exhibit Kimball's piece, despite its rejection by the judges, was made by Bernard Fraizer (Philbrook director 1947–1950), who apologized for the rejection to Kimball in a personal letter dated August 2, 1946. This letter states that he took it upon himself to make certain the work was visible during the Philbrook Annual.

In 1947, for the second Philbrook Annual, Kimball made adjustments based on the judges' comments and captured what she hoped would be a favored theme, the "happy hunting ground," the mythological destination of a three-day journey after death. This year F. Blackbear Bosin, Richard West, and Kimball received awards for the Plains group; Patrick DesJarlait, Tom Dorsey, Jimalee Burton, Fred Beaver, and W. Paul Rogers received awards for the Woodlands group; Jose Rey Toledo, Allan Houser, Gilbert Atencio, Velino Shije Herrera, and Joe H. Herrera received awards for the Southwest group; and Oscar Howe won best in show.[29] Kimball received an honorable mention in the Plains group that year, possibly because of her decisiveness in selecting a style and subject matter. Synthesizing established American Indian pictorial traditions in its graceful and simple forms, *To the Happy Hunting Ground* aligned with the accepted, established trajectory of modern American Indian painting, both visually and in subject matter, and was rewarded by the judges as a result.

As modernist styles developed and became more acceptable in the arena of American Indian painting, the judges of the Annual continued to accept Kimball's works for exhibition. Also accepted for exhibition in the 1947 Annual was a work of Eva Mirabel in the Studio style but *The Drummer* was not awarded a prize. Like

Kimball's, this work aligns visually with established conventions of American Indian painting as well as male-dominated subject matter. However, because themes in Maribel's paintings more typically concern the realms of women, one wonders if she instead chose to submit *The Drummer* because of its increased appeal to the judges and its better chances of receiving a purchase prize. Initially, Mirabel studied and taught at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, but later, in 1949, she studied at the Taos Valley Art School, where she painted in the style characteristic of the Dunn Studio: flat, unmodulated areas of color defined by darker outlines. During this time, Mirabel actively participated in Pueblo communal life and frequently took part in ritual dances at Taos Pueblo, where she lived for the remainder of her life. Her 1958 work *Taos Woman Carrying Bread* is an exemplar of her style, in which her embrace of community training and experiences inform the visual expression. The two-dimensional figure of a woman is placed on a background that is plain, untouched, and devoid of images. The woman appears to walk across the page while holding a basket filled with bread. She wears traditional Pueblo dress, including a brightly colored wool shawl, turquoise beads, and white buckskin boots. Her hair is cut in the style worn by young married women. The meticulous, realistic detail of the breadbasket's woven designs and the color of the sash around the woman's waist evidence Mirabel's intimate familiarity with the subject and engagement with imagery from her own community; baking, consuming, and trading bread has been an essential part of Taos life through the centuries.

In contrast to this immersion, Kimball's work exhibits imagery typical of many communities other than the one she had claimed as her own. Kimball's paintings rely more heavily on non-experiential information, some travel, and on her formal training in the abstract techniques of the New York art world. In her 1939 work *Zuni Maiden*, for example, a woman with a whitewashed pot balancing on her head strolls away from the viewer into an unknown, deep turquoise distance.[30] A sunset blend of pinks, oranges, and blues articulated in broad, flat strokes surround the woman. Similar expressionistic strokes constitute the woman's simple burnt-orange shawl fringed with what appear to be fraying, thick red threads. She holds a nondescript white pot steady with a short pole. To accompany Kimball's Zuni maiden as she journeys away from the viewer, curvy black lines form two faint figures with their arms waving above thin heads as they don horned masks. These figures, reminiscent of the katsina figures of Southwest American Indian cosmology, infuse Kimball's painting with a mystical quality. With her command of the formal elements in this piece, Kimball leaves the viewer not with an impression of an individualized Zuni woman, but with an icon meant to represent the passage of time and transformational journeys into other worlds, a style that implies a distance between artist and subject. Kimball was without long-established traditional connections to the people and cultures of the Southwest and, unlike Mirabel's life in Taos Pueblo, would have experienced them as an artistic visitor.

According to art historian Elizabeth Hutchinson, the increasing visibility of American Indian art during the "Indian Craze" of 1890–1915 also informed the resurgence of interest in American Indian art in the interwar years, when Kimball

launched her career. Additionally, Hutchinson states that although the early twentieth century "facilitated the development of American modernism," the period "was ambivalent about the potential for American Indians to be modern artists."[31] This ambivalence was something that Kimball attempted to change through her assumed identity and expressionist painting style. The Studio Style in which Mirabel worked, while prized by the Annual judges as fine American Indian painting, was lodged in the systemic hierarchy of American art as "decorative" and, therefore, less valuable than the European modernist style of painting that Kimball embraced.[32]

Kimball rose to fame in the American art world during the 1940s and 1950s, while American Indian women painters struggled. Pop Chalee (1906–1993), also known as Marina Lujan, for example, did not receive awards at the Philbrook Annuals and was not embraced by the larger arts world until later in her life. Her work was often disparaged for its "Bambi" aesthetic; her wide-eyed horses were too cute for the modern art critic.[33] Chalee remained dedicated to the flat, crisply outlined works of the Studio Style. In 1994, after her death, her work was included in the Heard Museum's exhibition of American Indian women artists, *Watchful Eyes: Native American Women Artists*. In the exhibition catalogue, curator of the exhibition Theresa Harlan combats criticisms of works by older generations of American Indian women, such as those by Chalee, as grounded in beliefs that do not take into consideration the historical circumstances under which these women artists worked. She states, "Many of the older artists experienced physical and mental punishment for refusing to assimilate while forced to attend government boarding school. Despite their experiences of familial and cultural deprivation in these schools, they understood that to think Native meant to survive as Native."[34] The significance of Chalee's works, and the works by the women included in the exhibition, is that they express American Indian thoughts and ideas that ultimately equated to the survival of their cultures.

Kimball received another award at the 1947 Annual for her oil painting, *Unconquered*. In this piece, her command of color and line are striking in her articulation of a male rider galloping on horseback across the picture plane. Tails and hair flutter behind the white-headed, blue-bodied, horse and its rider, implying swift movement. The image of a second, blue-headed horse appears galloping just ahead of and seemingly connected to the first. The figures in this large painting are depicted abstractly, yet a long, red ribbon that trails behind the rider as if blowing in the wind evidences his Plains Indian affiliation, as does his brooch and abstract breastplate. Silk ribbons recall trade between the French and the Osage during the late seventeenth century. The outline of a bird rests on the man's outstretched arm. Red, blue, and white dominate this work and possibly represent the contrast of colors as symbolic of the duality of the cosmos in the Osage worldview. Blue may also represent courage and red markings on the horse may represent blood or painted images that many Plains Indian tribes would create to decorate their horses before riding into battle.

The representation of this rider and his horse, like the pot and clothing in *Zuni Maiden*, reveals Kimball's reliance on material culture to affirm her identity in her artwork. While it is possible that the blue horses simply reflect her modernist art

training, it is more likely that Kimball, with her interest in American Indian cultures and her substantial library, had seen Plains Indian ledger drawings and hide paintings in which blue horses were common. Some Lakota people rode blue roan horses. Sashes such as the one in the hand of Kimball's rider appear in ledger drawings and hide paintings that had been on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art show *Art of the American Indian* in 1941.[35] In paintings like *Unconquered*, Kimball visually articulated the knowledge she acquired through reading, travel, and viewing collections, and the paintings served to reinforce her identity. Because she included aspects of American Indian material culture in her works and because images of males were relatable, expected, and desired by her primarily male audience, her viewers assumed that she must be an authentic American Indian artist, in a generic sense.

Kimball's harnessing of gender in her subject matter is perhaps most obviously revealed in her *Self-Portrait* of 1978 described at the beginning of this article. The painting's carefully chosen details seem to suggest to the viewer that Kimball has intimate knowledge of Plains Indian material culture. While this work reveals ways she harnessed existing gender and racial structures in American art to launch her career, the painting's title, *Self-Portrait*, and time period (1978 was the year of her death) indicate that this image acts as self-reflective of her identity. Kimball's self-fashioning as "Indian" is overlaid here with her self-representation as male, a powerful image that claims masculine identity as symbolic of success.

For decades, Kimball was recognized as a spokesperson for modern American Indian arts. In her survey of modern American Indian women painters of 1999, for example, author Patricia Broder refers to Kimball as "an authority on Native American art and culture," noting that Kimball "served as consultant on Native arts for several museums."[36] Broder identifies Kimball as one of the first American Indian artists to pursue an education in mainstream modern art and to embrace the tenets of modernism. When considering the legacy of Yeffe Kimball, however, it is vital to consider contemporary concerns, such as those expressed by leading critic and artist America Meredith (Cherokee), who asserts that to falsely represent oneself as American Indian and thereby achieve popularity and success damages our understandings of American Indian peoples and their cultures.[37]

Kimball combined her self-defined evocations of American Indian material culture with her modern arts education. Her experiences in school and in art exhibits were marked by gender bias, as teachers and judges prioritized art featuring male-dominated subject matter over art featuring more typically female themes. Additionally, the arts scene of the 1930s and 1940s itself was dominated by male judges, curators, directors, and artists. Kimball's privilege as a white person allowed her the freedom to incorporate male figures, subject matter, and style into her paintings without consideration of American Indian ideas about gender and visual art practices. Her style was embraced by the majority non-Native critics and a male-dominated arts world in general and Yeffee Kimball was able to achieve recognition as a modern American Indian woman painter despite the marginalization of this demographic group in the arts, both complicating the history and obscuring the realities.

Notes

1. Yeffe Kimball, *Self-Portrait*, 1978, Oil on canvas (collection of Harvey Slatin). This work can be viewed in Bill Anthes, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940–1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), plate 27.

2. Lloyd Oxendine, "23 Contemporary Indian Artists," *Art in America* 60, no. 4 (July 1, 1972): 58, repub. October 5, 2017, https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/23-contemporary-indian-artists/.

3. Ibid.

4. Kimball Memorial Service Documents, May 6, 1978.

5. Obituary of Yeffe Kimball, *Boston Globe*, April 12, 1978: 42.

6. In conversation with Nancy Marie Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache) on June 11, 2019, she recalled that Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee, 1916–2002) had conveyed to her that American Indian people of his generation were aware of fraud issues, but did not care to attend to them. Yeffe Kimball was "good to Indian people" and her ethnic fraud was not of concern.

7. Cynthia Fowler, "Gender, Modern Art, and Native Women Painters in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," in *American Women Artists, 1935–1970: Gender, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Helen Langa and Paula Wisotzki (New York: Routledge, 2016), 41–58.

8. Kimball enrolled at the Art Students League at 215 W. 57th Street, New York, NY, from 1935– 1939. She became a lifelong member.

9. Robert L. Herbert, "Léger, the Renaissance, and 'Primitivism,'" in *Millet to Léger: Essays in Social Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 143–52.

10. Ibid.

11. See Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

12. Nicholas Thomas, "Art Against Primitivism: Richard Bells' Post-Aryanism," *Anthropology Today* 11, no. 5 (1995): 15–17, https://doi.org/10.2307/2783186.

13. Harvey Slatin, Kimball's widower, created a comprehensive list of publications from Kimball's library donated to the Southern Plains Indian Museum in Anadarko, OK circa 1980. I discussed her life and works during semi-structured interviews with Slatin in 2011.

14. Native Languages of the Americas, "Legendary Native American Figures: Nanabozho (Nanabush)," http://www.native-languages.org/nanabozho.htm.

15. Yeffe Kimball, *The Old Medicine Man*, ca. 1959. Oil on board. (Museum purchase, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, OK, 1959.5).

16. Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

17. Jeanne Snodgrass King, "Foreword," in *Visions and Voices: Native American Paintings from the Philbrook Museum of Art*, ed. Lydia L. Wyckoff (Tulsa: Philbrook Museum of Art, 1996), 11–13.

18. Thomas E. Young, "Philbrook Museum of Art," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org.

19. For further discussion, see John Traugott, "Native American Artists and the Postmodern Cultural Divide," *Art Journal* 51, no. 3 (1992), 36–43, https://doi.org/10.2307/777346.

20. David Bunn Martine, *No Reservation: New York Contemporary Native American Art Movement*, ed. Jennifer Tromski (New York: AMERINDA, 2017), 234.

21. Philbrook Museum of Art, "What Is "Native Art?" The Philbrook Museum, www.philbook.org.

22. Margaret D. Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879–1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999). See also Erik Trump, "The Idea of Help," in *Selling*

the Indian Commercializing and Appropriating American Indian Cultures, ed. Carter Jones Meyer and Diana Royer (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001).

23. Wanda M. Corn, "Introduction: Mabel Dodge Luhan and Company," in *Mabel Dodge Luhan and Company: American Moderns and the West*, ed. Lois P. Rudnick and Ma Lin Wilson-Powell (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2016), 11–22.

24. Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Movers and Shakers: Volume Three of Intimate Memories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933).

25. Charts and tables listing prizes awarded for each category by year are included as the appendix to Stephanie Peters, "Creating to Compete Juried Exhibitions of Native American Painting, 1946–1960," MA thesis, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, May 2012.

26. *Visions And Voices: Native American Painting from the Philbrook Museum of Art*, ed.Lydia L. Wyckoff (Tulsa: Philbrook Museum of Art, 1996), 41.

27. Mary Jo Watson's dissertation brings attention to Smoky and her significance. See Mary Jo Watson, "Oklahoma Indian Women and Their Art," Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1993. See also Jacobson House, "About the Kiowa Six," The Jacobson House Native Art Center, https://jacobsonhouse.org/kiowa-five/#lois.

28. Bernard Frazier to Kimball, n.d. (1947?), Yeffe Kimball Papers, U.S. Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board, Southern Plains Indian Museum.

29. Peters, "Creating to Compete," 69–79.

30. Yeffe Kimball, *Zuni Maiden*, 1939. Oil on board. (Gift of Yeffe Kimball, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, OK, 1968.2.1).

31. Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890–1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

32. For more on the relationships between gender, race, and the arts and crafts movement, see Melanie Herzog, "Aesthetics and Meanings: The Arts and Crafts Movement and the Revival of American Indian Basketry," in *Substance of Style: Perspectives on the American Arts and Crafts Movement*, ed. Bert Denker (Winterthur: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1996), 69–91.

33. Patricia Janis Broder, American Indian Painting and Sculpture (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), 36. See also Margaret Cesa, *The World of Flower Blue: Pop Chalee an Artistic Biography* (Santa Fe: Red Crane Books, 1997).

34. Theresa Harlan, "To Watch, to Remember and to Survive," in *Watchful Eyes: Native American Women Artists* (Phoenix, AZ: Heard Museum, 1994), 10.

35. Frederic H. Douglas and Rene D'Harnoncourt, *Indian Art of the United States* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1941).

36. Patricia Janis Broder, *Earth Songs, Moon Dreams: Paintings by American Indian Women* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 116.

37. America Meredith, "Why It Matters that Jimmy Durham Is Not a Cherokee," *Artnet News*, July 7, 2017, https://news.artnet.com/opinion/jimmie-durham-america-meredith-1014164.