



A proposed mural for the Museum of the Plains Indian at Browning, Montana, with study based on personal adaptation of remembered themes or motifs
by Neil Henry Parsons

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF APPLIED ART
Montana State University
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Abstract:

Today it is generally accepted that traditional expressions in the arts can be extended. The increasing demand for a closer continuity between the past and the present is clearly evident in the utilization and manipulation of universal symbols by contemporary artists.

In some cases success is achieved by the artist relying wholly upon research and observation; however, it seems logical that a very valid contribution might be made by the artist possessing a direct cultural orientation.

Moreover, if the artist is not only conversant with the cultural forces of the specific tradition, but is, also trained in modes of contemporary art expression, he finds himself in a position to combine these two forces in a unique and meaningful way.

It was with these ideas in mind that the following thesis project was planned and executed.

A PROPOSED MURAL FOR THE MUSEUM OF THE PLAINS INDIAN AT BROWNING, MONTANA,
WITH STUDY BASED ON PERSONAL ADAPTATION OF REMEMBERED THEMES OR MOTIFS.

BY

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial
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VI.

ABSTRACT

Today it is generally accepted that traditional expressions in the arts can be extended. The increasing demand for a closer continuity between the past and the present is clearly evident in the utilization and manipulation of universal symbols by contemporary artists.

In some cases success is achieved by the artist relying wholly upon research and observation; however, it seems logical that a very valid contribution might be made by the artist possessing a direct cultural orientation.

Moreover, if the artist is not only conversant with the cultural forces of the specific tradition, but is also trained in modes of contemporary art expression, he finds himself in a position to combine these two forces in a unique and meaningful way.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of abstract Indian painting as a thesis took form as a result of a change in attitude experienced by the artist within the past two years. Earlier, it had seemed that in order to succeed in painting it would be necessary for him to overcome the compulsions of his Indian background, and try to lose his identity with that tradition in the overwhelming atmosphere of a big, modern city. However, he gradually realized that the forces of a motivating atmosphere like the big city, and those of an individual's background are two different things; and that he might best be able to express himself through the use of traditional Indian cultural ideas in an intellectualized contemporary manner.

The first ideas for a thesis arising from this concept contained strong social attitudes. The description of the social and cultural unrest now being felt by Indians on the Reservation was considered and rejected, because it was felt that a problem of this nature would tend to distract the artist from a complete creative challenge, as well as present an unrewarding and negative aspect of the culture involved.

A later idea was to illustrate a series of stories about a culture-hero of the Blackfeet known as Napi or the Old Man. He is credited with the creation of the earth and all things and is primarily described in a humorous manner.

Although these first ideas had possibilities for contemporary motivation, the artist decided that, rather than attempting to illustrate

present or past characters, he would express timeless Indian cultural elements in a contemporary way.

Such a plan was decided upon in the form of a contemporary abstract mural for the prehistoric section of the Museum of the Plains Indian at Browning, Montana.

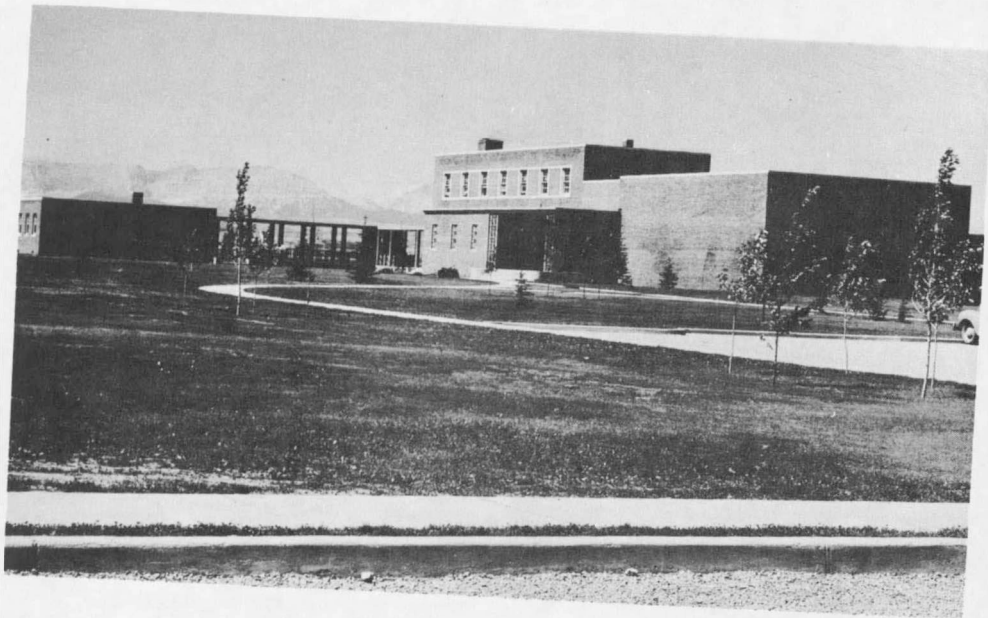


Figure 1. Museum of the Plains Indian at Browning, Montana



Figure 2. A typical display area within the Museum

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem was the painting of a contemporary mural for the Museum of the Plains Indian at Browning, Montana, which would present significant associative meaning to all viewers. It was to be accompanied by a short explanation of the motivational forces involved, and how the painting was executed.

The problem involved:

1. the presentation of traditional Indian elements of design in an abstract manner.
2. the design of a mural that would work in with the traditional atmosphere of the Museum.
3. the selection of media, process of execution, and installation.

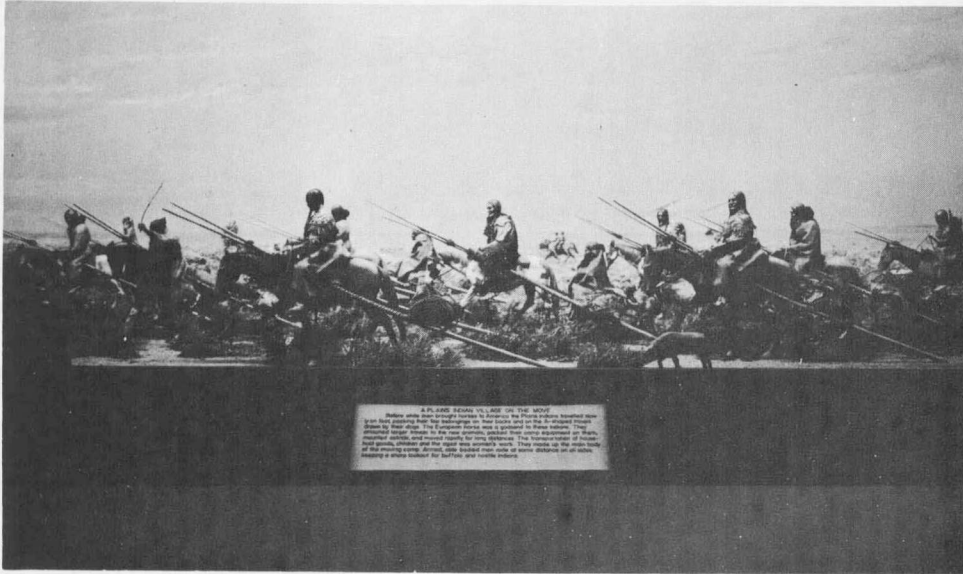


Figure 3. A diorama typical of the historical displays in the Museum



Figure 4. A diorama in the Museum suggesting the plains landscape.

NOTES ON PLAINS INDIAN PAINTING

The brightly colored geometric design that is today associated with the American Plains Indian is a relatively recent style developed since the introduction of commercial colors by the white man. Prior to this, the chief means of decorative expression was in the painting of hides used for clothing. Densmore, from his study of the Teton Sioux writes:

The colors used in the painting on hides were principally earth pigments. Browns and yellow found in the form of ferruginous clays, were commonly employed. A red paint was sometimes made by treating an original yellow ochreous substance with heat. A black earth or charcoal served as black.¹

These hide paintings of which Densmore speaks, are the only significant evidence suggesting the form of Plains Indian painting. Ewers says:

All statements prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century are so general or fragmentary, that they throw no light on the exact forms of the designs used. We cannot discover whether the paintings were geometric or pictographic or both. It is even possible that some of the painting mentioned was simply monochrome surface decoration with no design of any kind.²

It would probably be safe however, to agree with those who believe that early American Indians, like most primitive peoples, began their art with symbols associated with the primary demands of human existence.

¹Ewers, John Canfield, Plains Indian Painting, Stanford University Press, Stanford University, California, 1939, p. 5. (citing Densmore, Frances, BAE-b, No. 61, Washington, D. C., 1918, p. 116).

²Ibid., p. 26.

Giedion, in his book on primitive art, states:

The main purpose of primitive existence was to obtain food. Food means the animal. Where direct attack on the animal was not successful, rituals, magic, signs, and magic symbols were devised, by which man hoped to be invested with power to bewitch the animal.³

Although the prehistoric Indian artist may have been concerned mainly with the symbols associated with his existence, it is plain to see that by the time of the earliest recorded hide paintings, he was already putting a great deal of emphasis upon the decorative elements involved.

Ewers writes:

The very personal nature of design interpretation discourages any attempt to categorize symbolism and meaning in Plains Indian painting. Rather, the geometric designs and their variance suggest personal aesthetic tastes and inherent knowledge.⁴

Plains Indian painting today is limited to a small number of artists who are primarily concerned with the illustration of traditional ceremonies and rituals in a realistic but highly stylized way. They have become members of a more-or-less universal school of American Indian painting.

There are, however, a small number of those who realize the great potentials of contemporary American Indian painting.

³Giedion, S., The Eternal Present: The Beginnings of Art, Bollingen Series XXXV-6-i, Pantheon Books, New York, 1962, p. 88.

MOTIVATION

After the author realized that certain timeless traditional qualities of Plains Indian culture could serve well as creative stimuli for the contemporary artist, and that many of those visual elements known to him in relation to his Indian background could be used in a new and creative manner, the false associations they once had with the present day social conditions of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Northern Montana, were forgotten. In their place was the strong urge to express creatively to all, the colors and shapes of the plains and the early cultures that existed there.

Of his boyhood environment on the Reservation, the artist recalls how he has always been fascinated by the large flat areas of tan and sage green suggested by the hot summer landscapes that seem to stretch endlessly, and the long, thin, purple-blue lines of the far-off hazy ridges. He remembers the sometimes pale and transparent, and sometimes powdery and opaque reds that have always been associated with either the stains of wild berry juices, or the cheek rouge of old Indian women. And there are the large dark shapes of buffalo hides, boulders, or early implements, (Fig. 9), and the line textures of willows, scrape marks, black hair, poles, and wind blown grass, (Fig. 6), He remembers, too, the dots and spaces of buckskin edges, and tracks in the snow.

These, then, are a few of the elements of Indian life that have not been altered by the establishment of a dominant white culture. Therefore,

they can be called the timeless elements of Indian life.

PRELIMINARY STUDY

Upon starting a graduate program, the author spent some time in re-acquainting himself with various elements of media and technique.

The first quarter of painting was spent in the study of drawing characteristics, composition, and color, and much interest was directed toward the study of the Abstract Expressionists. The color of DeKooning, the frenzy of Tworlov (influence illustrated in Fig. 6) and the proud tranquility of Kline (influence illustrated in Fig. 8) inspired the first attempts at combining art with Indian content.

The next quarters of painting and sculpture brought about the development of abstract shapes suggesting the designs of the contemporary Indian, although the color was usually limited to a monochromatic range (the use of one color through different shades and tones). In sculpture, the use of brightly colored parts from wrecked automobile bodies afforded the artist a chance to work with these shapes three dimensionally, (Fig. 5).

It was during the following two quarters of serigraphy that a definite form began to evolve. Large areas of transparent color suggested the landscape of the Plains. Associated shapes were also reminiscent of a primitive environment. They presented an over-all image that sometimes resembled a large pouch-like container; at other times, the form of a monolithic cross or lintel shape not unlike Stonehenge.

During the past year, many ideas suggesting his heritage have

entered the compositions of the artist. While working with aniline dyes on buff-colored board, it was discovered that large round shapes in dark earth colors seemed to give the feeling of a boulder-strewn prehistoric landscape (Fig. 7). Other discoveries through associated media were the blue stripe and red spot to suggest decoration by man of himself, (Figs. 7 and 9). It was also during this time that the use of an off-white ground proved effective in capturing the feeling of scraped hides and buckskin, (Fig. 11). This off-white color also served as the important element of line in the hide paintings of the Plains Indians. In his description of Plains Indian painting, Ewers writes:

Line was an important aspect of Plains painting in that it was used to separate color areas. In addition to its use in setting the pigments in the designs, the sizing was employed to make white lines on the skin. It deposits a kind of gluey substance. A hide is clean and white when it is first painted, and wherever the sizing, which is transparent, is applied without pigment it permits the surface beneath to show through. As the hide soils by use the lines drawn in with sizing appear white in relief.¹

As can be seen, the variety of stimuli tends to discourage any single symbolic reference. Rather, it tends to suggest an overall or timeless picture of Plains Indian life. The artist is determined to express his own beliefs in a way that will be recognized by his contemporaries. The painter Barnett Newman writes:

¹Ewers, John Canfield, op. cit., p. 6., From the unpublished notes of G. L. Wilson.

If we are living in a time without a legend...how can we be making a sublime art?... We are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.² (1948).

In the painting for the Plains Indian Museum, an attempt is made to suggest that an American Indian artist has a role in the world of contemporary expression.

²Newman, Barnett. Art International, VI/5-6, Summer, 1962, p. 90.

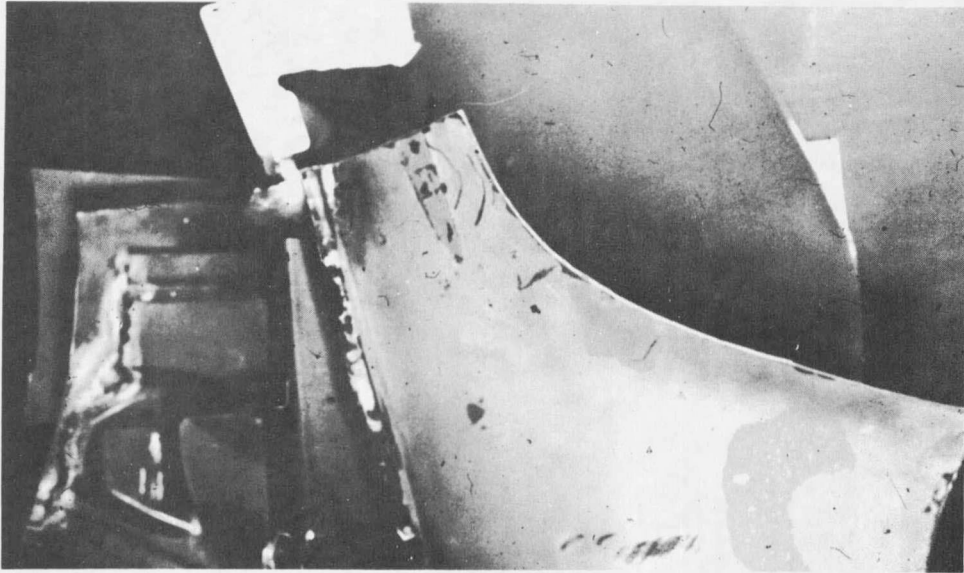


Figure 5. Preliminary study--sculpture suggesting contemporary design

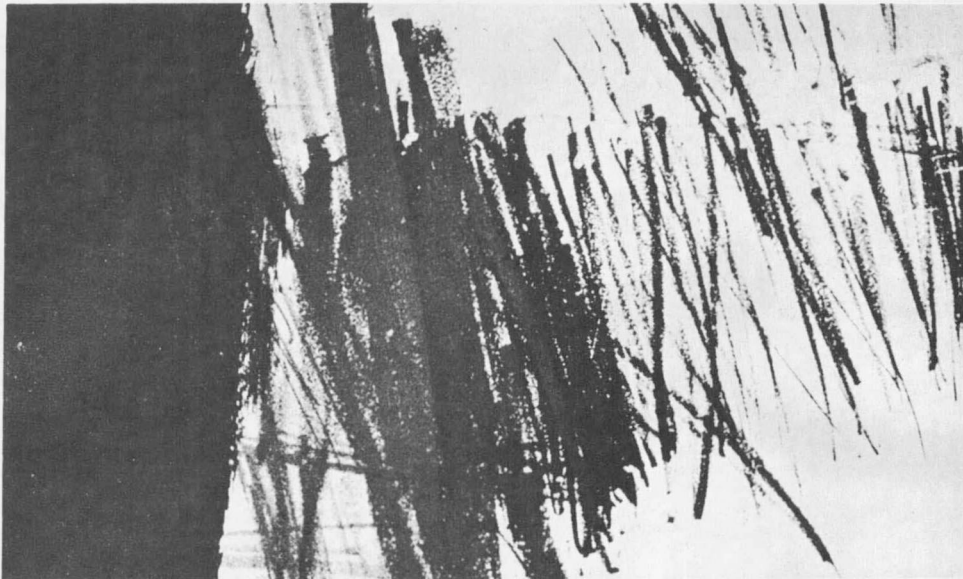


Figure 6. Preliminary study--theme of dance rhythms (frenzy)

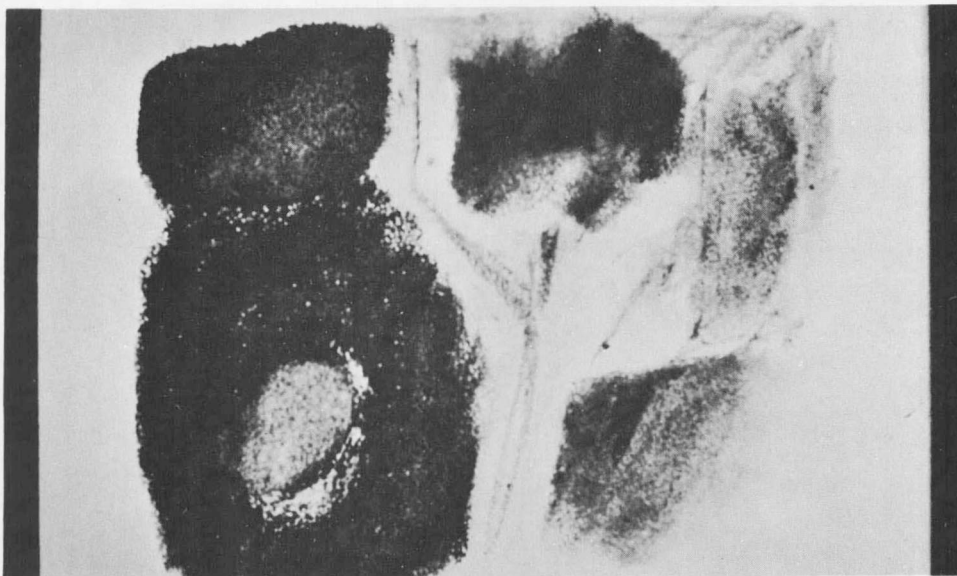


Figure 7. Preliminary study--theme of boulder shapes and berry red

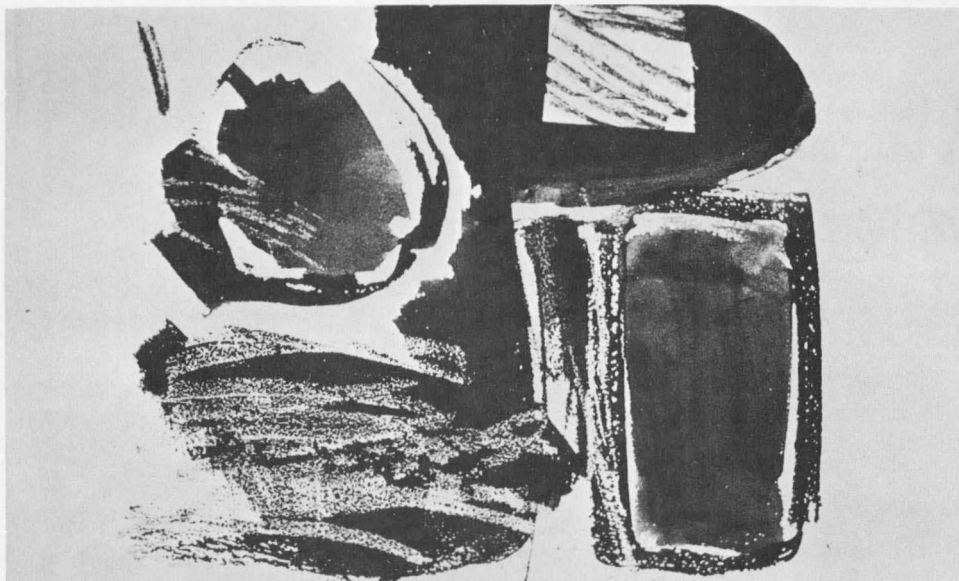


Figure 8. Preliminary study--theme of buckskin and blue paint

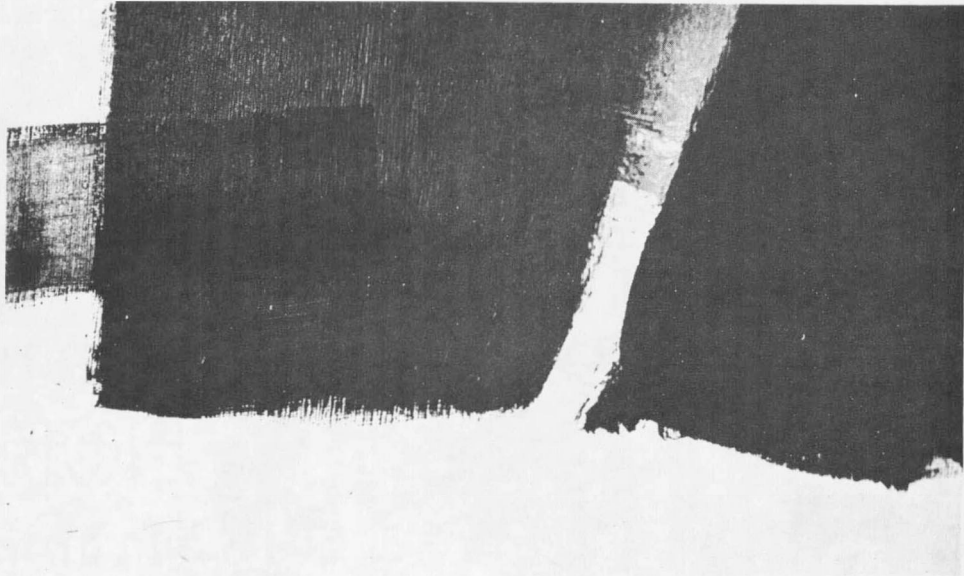


Figure 9. Preliminary study--theme of hide shapes and blue line

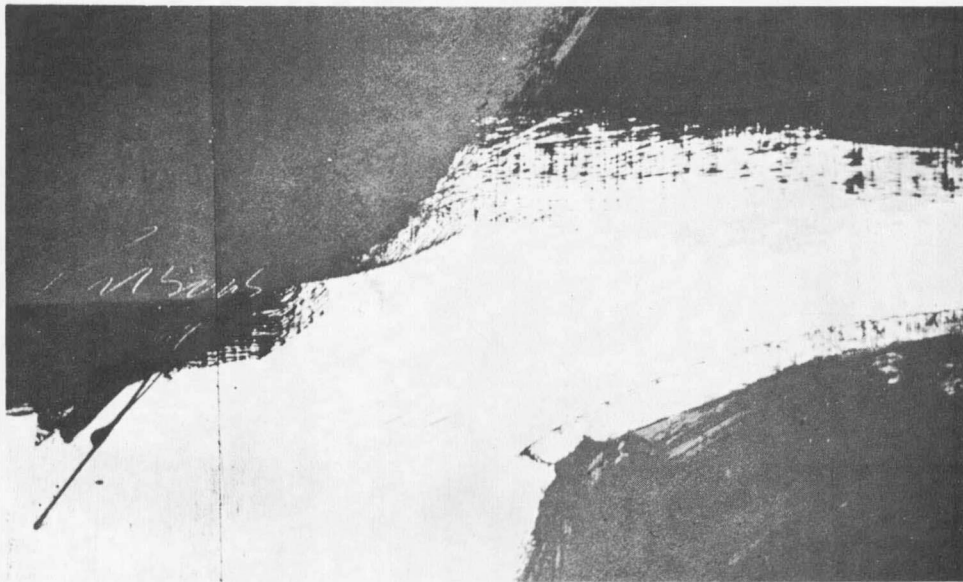


Figure 10. Detail of finished mural

PROCESS OF EXECUTION

The dimensions of the mural, 3' X 16', were determined by the available space on the top and front of a large display case holding prehistoric artifacts, (Fig. 12). The case is located in the neutral grey surroundings of the room containing significant archeological discoveries.

The final installation would be as four separate 3' X 4' paintings, (one of these illustrated in Fig. 11) all of which would inter-relate as a whole. The four paintings would be mounted flush with the ends of the 3' X 20' space and have equal spacing of 1'4" revealing the original dark brown surface of the case between them. It was felt that the shape of the area to be filled constituted a breakup of the composition, and in so doing, the room would be made to appear larger.

A series of masonite panels 2' X 3' were chosen for their ease of handling and transportation. Such panels could be installed over the existing plywood facing by the use of strong epoxy cement.

The desired ground of simulated antiquity was accomplished by rubbing a walnut wood stain over two coats of flat white primer. A second coat of burnt umber stain was applied in spots then wiped off overall. The painting itself was executed in the following palette of oil-base tinting colors:

Chrome green dark	Raw siena
Prussian blue	Yellow ochre
Burnt umber	Venetian red
Raw umber	Flat white
Burnt siena	Flat black

The colors were generally put on in a fluid consistency in order to achieve certain desirable qualities such as splashes, scrapes, and dry brush. This technique also promoted fast drying and less delay in the development. The choice of color was based on the statement desired. Ewers quotes an early fur trader, Alexander Henry the younger, as having named ten different colors of earth and clay of the nineteenth century "in painting and daubing their garments, bodies, and faces." These were "a dark red, nearly a Spanish brown: a red, inclining to pale vermillion: a deep yellow; a light yellow; a dark blue; a light, or sky colored blue; a shining and glossy lead color; a green; a white; and charcoal."¹

Two coats of mat varnish and a final coat of thinned damar varnish were applied to preserve the painting and to insure the intensity of the rather subtle colors.

¹Ewers, John Canfield, op. cit., p. 7., From Henry, A., and Thompson, David, New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest, Edited by Elliott Coues, New York, 1897, p. 731.

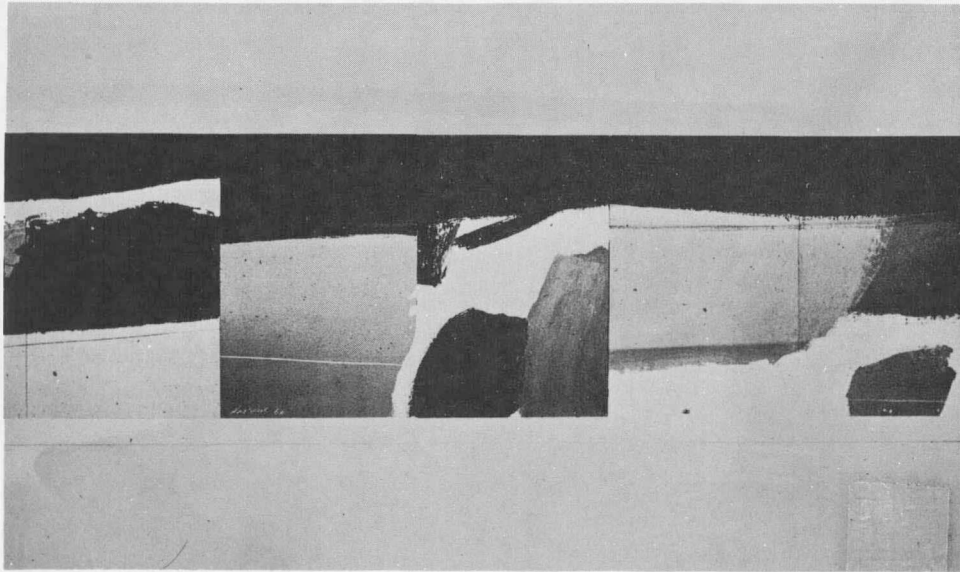


Figure 11. Section of finished mural



Figure 12. Composite photograph of mural and site

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CONCLUSION

The artist feels that he has accomplished to some degree, a synthesis of traditional Indian feeling and contemporary expression in a mural designed to fit a specific environment. It has been a springboard from which he hopes to further explore the idea of the timelessness of art.

He also has developed a sense of responsibility in relation to the problems of the contemporary Indian artist and a stronger faith in the validity of traditional Indian art.

