FRANK OVERTON COLBERT: A STUDY IN TRANS-CUSTOMARY INDIGENOUS MODERN ART

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Brian L. Hearn, Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree
University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2021

ABSTRACT

As the art historical canon makes a turn toward decolonization in the 21st century, art historians have an opportunity to rediscover and recognize long marginalized artists whose contributions expand, complicate, and enhance the conventional narrative that has most often privileged the work of white male artists. When we look at the development of American modernism in fine art, particularly at the period between the Armory Show of 1913 and the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, artists fervently desired to create a distinctively American visual culture which moved beyond European academic or avant-garde influences. In the midst of this tumultuous period of American experimentation, a cosmopolitan, Chickasaw artist named Frank Overton Colbert emerged on the New York art scene. He produced an innovative body of work which has largely been forgotten since its initial display. Colbert's artistic production, consisting of more than seventy paintings produced between 1920 and 1923, was emblematic of the modernist zeitgeist while being concomitantly rooted in Native American tribal cultures. Colbert's small paintings of pan-indigenous "gods" and "folklore," accompanied by narrative texts and performative actions, became an art world sensation, albeit brief, when Colbert began exhibiting in New York.

In this study of Frank Overton Colbert's few surviving works, I describe the aesthetic qualities and influences on his artistic practice and contextualize the diverse indigenous subject matter he painted. I also review the exhibition history and critical reception of his

practice. Through these means, I aim to cast light on Colbert's larger project as a trans-customary artist, a trans-cultural interpreter, and a significant indigenous presence within the evolving canons of both Native North American modernism and American modernist painting.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis title "Frank Overton Colbert: A Study in Trans-Customary Indigenous Modern Art" presented by Brian L. Hearn, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ... iii

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ... vii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ... viii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION ... 1

2. AESTHETIC QUALITIES, STYLISTIC HYBRIDITY, TRANSCULTURAL TEXTS ... 9

3. EXHIBITION HISTORY AND CRITICAL RECEPTION ... 30

4. TRANS-CUSTOMARY ART PRACTICE AND POSTINDIAN SURVIVANCE ... 49

5. CONCLUSIONS ... 63

REFERENCE LIST ... 70

VITA ... 75

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure Page

1. Frank Overton Colbert, *Trail to the Happy Hunting Ground* 12

2. Frank Overton Colbert, *Cipikne* 17, 26

3. Frank Overton Colbert, *Citoto* 17, 24

4. Frank Overton Colbert, *Macibol* 17

5. Jay Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry: root-four rectangle* 18

6. Jay Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry: Egyptian relief with composition lines* 19

7. Frank Overton Colbert, *Coming into the Fifth World Where Light was Found* 20

8. Frank Overton Colbert, *The Rain God and Cactus* 20

9. Hopi artist, *Citoto ethnographic drawing, Jesse Walter Fewkes, Hopi Katcinas* 24

10. Hopi artist, *Cipikne ethnographic drawing, Jesse Walter Fewkes, Hopi Katcinas* 26

11. Frank Overton Colbert, *Monwu* 27

12. Hopi artist, *Monwu Wuqti ethnographic drawing, Jesse Walter Fewkes,*
Hopi Katcinas 27

13. Frank Overton Colbert, *The Origin of Design* 35

14. Emil Nolde, *Fetishes (Exotic Figures)* 55

15. Emil Nolde, *Fetishes (Exotic Figures II)* 55

16. Frank Overton Colbert, *God of Northern Lights* 56

17. Frank Overton Colbert, *Tlaloc*, *God of Waters* 58

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Frank Overton Colbert was a Chickasaw modernist painter from Oklahoma. Following his U.S. Naval service as a *camoufleur* during World War I, he went from provincial obscurity to gaining brief critical recognition in the centers of modern artistic experimentation in New York and Paris in the 1920s. Colbert achieved unprecedented success as an indigenous artist with multiple solo exhibitions at the prestigious Montross Gallery, known for showing the foremost American modernists, many of whom now fill the collections of American art museums. He circulated among and exhibited with the vanguard of American modern artists of his time at venues like the Whitney Studio Club, which preceded the foundation of the museum of American art patronized by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. At the 37th Annual Exhibition of the Architectural League of New York in 1922, Colbert's twenty-five "Indian Folk Lore" paintings were an extraordinary highlight. Two of his works, *The Origin of Design* and the katsina painting *Indian Legend*, were reproduced in the "Decoration" section of the catalogue. Colbert's crisp, colorful geometric paintings were showcased alongside fine examples of interior, graphic and architectural design.

After three successful years in Greenwich Village, he relocated to Montparnasse in 1923. The cosmopolitan Colbert saw his work exhibited in two Paris Salons before the onset of mental health problems that prompted his fateful return to the United States and largely ended his career. His evocative paintings, accompanied by narrative texts, and his public artistic/indigenous persona called "Red Feather" demonstrated a distinctive stylistic hybridity of modern aesthetics applied exclusively to pan-indigenous subject matter. Colbert occupied a paradoxical position that is challenging to untangle. He was a privileged cultural outsider

from an aristocratic Chickasaw family who chafed against the social and familial expectations to assimilate to Euro-American life ways. Thanks to his commitment to his art, continuing education, extensive travel, military service, and natural talent, Colbert became an accomplished modernist insider, easily mixing in urban bohemian art circles. A particularly savvy self-promoter, he was an undeniable indigenous presence in a formative period of American modernist art. Nonetheless, his oeuvre remained outside the art historical canon for three primary reasons: the work defies easy categorization, his exhibition career was limited to a few short years, and until recently, the scarcity of available works to study has obscured his legacy.

My initial encounter with Colbert's practice came through the earliest known scholarly reference to the artist in John I. H. Baur's *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art*. Published in 1951, the book traced the divergent currents of American modernism in the first half of the 20th century. Baur's chapter "The Machine and the Subconscious" addressed the revolution in subject matter of the period. He noted the relatively light impact of European Dada on American painting in the late teens through the figures of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, which revived an oral history of a scarcely known American relative of Dada called "Inje-Inje." The movement was characterized by its brazen, possibly fabricated, appropriation of indigenous cultural expression applied to a multidisciplinary experimental art project. Holger Cahill, Icelandic born curator, writer and publicity man, was the source of Baur's account. He claimed to have founded the short-lived movement in collaboration with several well-known painters: Mark Tobey, Alfred Maurer, William Gropper, and John Sloan, and poets, Malcolm Cowley and Orrick Johns. Cahill is quoted as stating that "Frank Overton Colbert, a Chickasaw Indian, was one of the most

active painters in the group."[1] He described to Baur a modern Primitivist project to radically simplify visual, literary, and performing art forms by cutting away all cultural artifice. The goal was to "discover the basic and most direct forms of human expression."[2] Based on a dubious ethnographic source, the concept was reportedly inspired by a South American indigenous tribe that relied on variations of a single word, "Inje," for communication. Though many of the "Inje-Inje" proposals for concerts, theatrical performances and a magazine went unrealized or undocumented, the presence of a Chickasaw artist in its midst caught my attention. Without having seen any of his paintings, the questions of who Colbert was and why he would participate in a specious indigenous art movement led me into this research.

Art historian Alan W. Moore is the only other scholar to investigate Colbert in any depth. He also encountered Colbert in Baur's reference to the artist as part of the Inje-Inje movement. In the 1990s, Moore pursued the obscure Inje-Inje movement and its participants, including Colbert, as the subject of his M.A. thesis. He went on to publish a more general overview of Colbert's life and work in *The Journal of Chickasaw History*.[3] In that article, Moore brought forth the lively contemporaneous context of artistic experimentation that Colbert found himself in circa 1920 in New York. He remarked on Colbert's rapid success in exhibiting alongside the now canonized peers of American modernism. Moore also identified his visual signatures: sparse figuration, geometric compositions, and potent use of color.

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[1] John I. H. Baur, *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 29.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Alan W. Moore, "F. Overton Colbert: Forgotten Chickasaw Modernist," *The Journal of Chickasaw History* vol. 3, no.3 (1997), 9-17. Colbert artist file, Chapman Library, Philbrook Museum of Art.

Moore underscored Colbert's central struggle that still resonates to this day: "how to be a modern artist and a Native American." Moore ran into research challenges because of Colbert's largely unlocated oeuvre. He acknowledged that any judgement of his work would be premature until he became a less "shadowy figure."

Following in Moore's footsteps, I set out to locate Colbert's handful of surviving paintings. When I began my research in 2015, only five paintings of his existed in public collections, all of them in Oklahoma where Colbert was born in 1895. Since then, nine new paintings have come to the surface, opening up new possibilities for understanding Colbert's work. *Citoto* (Figure 3), the first of his paintings to emerge in more than fifty years, was found in the closet of a Colbert relative in 2016. I had the privilege of examining *Citoto* in person with my museum curator colleague, heather ahtone, and Colbert's relatives. It was later donated to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, one of the two museums that hold Colbert's work. Eight more newly discovered works were sold through the Paris auction house Ader Nordmann in 2017 and 2018. In the latter sale, they promoted Colbert on the cover of the auction catalogue and positioned him as a "major artist of American art in the 1920s" and the "first Indian to exhibit in New York." These announcements attracted significant media attention in France.[4] All of the paintings sold well above their estimated prices, proving the economic potential of Colbert's work in the global art market ever hungry for discoveries. Despite the lack of prior scholarly interest, Colbert's unexpected resurgence into the art market has sparked interest in new interpretations of his work.

[4] Ader Nordmann Art Impressionniste & Modern auction catalogue. Paris (November 17, 2017): 54-57; Ader Nordmann Art Impressionniste & Modern auction catalogue. Paris (May 18, 2018): 74-91. I was surprised to discover my own unpublished research cited in this catalogue without having been in touch with the publisher.

American folk art specialist, author and art dealer Steven S. Powers selected Colbert's painting *Trail to the Happy Hunting Ground* (Figure 1) for the cover of his 2018 catalogue for the Outsider Art Fair in New York. Powers acknowledged the slippery definition of Outsider Art, typically inclusive of art by folk, self-taught, or naïve artists and even by artists with some training. He contextualized Colbert's work among a group of artists that straddled insider/outsider categories, like the visionary painter Forrest Bess who exhibited in New York, or Ida Jones, a self-taught African-American mother of ten children who began painting at age seventy-two. Powers observed that "Colbert's whole oeuvre deserves fresh eyes and examination, as he sits on the edge of many overlapping interests including early Modernism, Native American fine art and Outsider Art."[5] It is precisely this resistance to easy categorization that contributed to Colbert's work falling through the canonical cracks. He was stylistically quite unlike any American modernist painter of his time in the way he hybridized geometric abstraction with exclusively indigenous mythological subject matter. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, Colbert, along with many of his peers, shared visual affinities with various modern art movements including Post-Impressionism, Primitivism, Cubo-futurism, Expressionism, Dada, Synchromism, Surrealism, Precisionism.

Native North American art historians, Berlo and Phillips, point out that "Native engagement with twentieth-century art produced a number of 'modernisms' rather than a single monolithic style. Each artist's oeuvre, furthermore, reveals a unique negotiation of particular Native traditions and modernist models."[6] Colbert seemed to have his brush in everything, and made himself into a "trans-customary" artist, a contemporary term for

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[5] Steven S. Powers "<insider/outsider/>," online exhibition catalogue, New York (Outsider Art Fair, January 18-21, 2018): 7. Accessed on January 22, 2018 at: https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/fullscreen/59622503/insider-outsider

[6] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips. *Native North American Art*, (2015), 233.

indigenous artists who adapted and transformed traditional tribal forms for a Euro-American audience while maintaining “visual empathy” with their native sources.[7] His paintings reflect a syncretic blend of pan-indigenous modernism, what Moore called, “Chickasaw Modernism,” a transcultural tendency which brought him in conflict with some of his Native artist peers[8] Now, as we decolonize the canon of American art history, we can expand the conventional narrative to include marginalized contributions from forgotten artists like Colbert – a distinctive indigenous presence in the New York avant-garde circles and a brief, but meaningful, contributor to the story of American modern art.

While conducting research on Colbert, I have wrestled with the complexity of his artistic project and its complicated relationship to the art of his time. More of Colbert’s paintings and narrative texts are bound to be discovered. In the meantime, there is much more to understand about Colbert’s artistic training and practice, his exhibition history and critical reception, and the ways he negotiated a simultaneously modern and indigenous identity. The aim of this study is to build on Moore’s work by closely considering the Colbert paintings which have recently emerged. I will expand on the interpretation of his works through the theme of hybridity that permeated his identity and artistic project, as well as the perspectives of contemporary indigenous scholars. The new Colbert works give us a fuller picture of his diverse painting skills and how he modified and introduced tribal forms into an innovative American modernist vision.

[7] Robert Jahnke, ‘‘He tataitanga ahua toi: The House that Riwai Built, A Continuum of Maori art,” (PhD thesis, Massey University, New Zealand, 2006), http://hdl.handle.net/10179/984. I derive these terms from Jahnke, Maori artist and educator, who theorized a rubric for the perceptual relationship between traditional forms and contemporary indigenous artists.

[8] Moore, “F. Overton Colbert: Forgotten Chickasaw Modernist.”

In the following chapter I will delve into the aesthetic qualities of Colbert's oeuvre within the flourishing vocabulary of American modernism. Formal analysis of a selection of his few surviving works and tracing Colbert's stylistic influences, in particular the compositional methodology of "dynamic symmetry," reveals how Colbert consistently applied this method to create a painted codex of pan-indigenous cosmology. He achieved this through direct lived experience with numerous tribal cultures in his travels, as well appropriating imagery from ethnographic sources. Colbert's written texts that accompanied his paintings merit attention, as well, especially how they were displayed and interpreted.

The third chapter reviews Colbert's exhibition history and critical reception, especially in New York, and explores the artist's milieu and practice. In it, I show how Colbert's oeuvre is linked to the art movements of his time but ultimately proved problematic to categorize as being both modern and Native North American art. The fourth chapter will consider Colbert's larger project through the lens of contemporary theories of indigenous scholars Robert Jahnke and Gerald Vizenor. In so doing, I aim to illuminate key aspects of Colbert's practice that have been unexplored and largely misunderstood. Specifically, I argue that Colbert's modernist oeuvre can be understood in Robert Jahnke's schematic of "trans-customary" indigenous art practice.[9] Jahnke's theories suggest that Colbert's pan-indigenous modernism was part of a natural continuum of change and adaptation in tribal art. Colbert's indigenous identity and his wider artistic project, involving painting, writing and performance, are likewise aligned with Gerald Vizenor's concepts of "postindian"

[9] Robert Jahnke, "Toioho ki Apiti the Awakening of Creativity: A Pedagogy for Trans-national Art," *International Journal of the Arts in Society*, Volume 4, Issue 2 (2009): 97-112.

indigenous “survivance.”[10] From this perspective, Colbert courageously and creatively asserted his indigenous presence as a vital continuance of culture.

Frank Overton Colbert’s practice embodied a provocative encounter between indigeneity and modernity at an important stage in the development of both Native North American modernism and American modernist painting. While Colbert’s work does not fit neatly in art taxonomies, it occupies multiple categories. His practice constitutes a significant example of an alternative, pan-indigenous modernism.

[10] Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

CHAPTER 2

AESTHETIC QUALITIES, STYLISTIC HYBRIDITY, TRANSCULTURAL TEXTS

Frank Overton Colbert's relatively short career as an exhibiting artist, from circa 1915 to the early 1930s, followed by decades of obscurity, meant that only a handful of his paintings can be found in public collections, that is, until eight more surfaced at auction in 2017-18. Several more of his works were reproduced in newspapers or exhibition catalogues during his most active period in the 1920s. As such, art historians are limited to a visual record of approximately twenty works compared to the one-hundred or more paintings and drawings exhibited in his posthumous retrospective in New York in 1963.[1] Based on my close study of Frank Overton Colbert's fourteen known paintings, I will identify their primary aesthetic qualities and how he developed an unusual stylistic hybridity of modernist painting techniques infused with indigenous spiritual content.

Colbert typically painted at an easel favoring the materials of oil on canvas board, and sometimes watercolor on paper. He also had a preference for vertically oriented compositions. His largest surviving works measure just sixteen by twelve inches. Despite the relatively small scale of the work, one is immediately struck by several visual impressions. Colbert's paintings display a bold, sophisticated use of color harmonies with short compact brush strokes applied to maximize optical effects. His flat, singular figures are often inscribed in dynamic geometric compositions situated in abstracted landscapes. Additionally, Colbert wrote and displayed typed narrative texts to contextualize his images of a pan-indigenous cosmology for a white settler audience and market.

[1] "Press Release, Galerie Paula Insel.," March 11, 1963. Jeanne Snodgrass King Collection. Billie Jean Baguley Library and Archives, Heard Museum.

In documenting more than seventy titled works from Colbert's exhibition history, I have concluded the artist was producing a visual index of indigenous cosmology, primarily representing individual spirit beings from many different tribal cultures. A linguistic analysis of his titles shows that more than half of his documented works directly invoked "God," "Gods," "Goddess," or "Spirit", while several more titles were specific indigenous names of spiritual beings appropriated from diverse tribal sources including his own Chickasaw culture, as well as Hopi, Navajo, Zuni, Ute, Aztec, and others. Colbert's decidedly modernist stance toward appropriating source material from tribes outside his own, was clearly targeted at the Euro-American audience. His approach eventually proved to be controversial among some of his indigenous artist peers. A decade after Colbert's groundbreaking solo exhibitions in New York, several Pueblo painters filed an official protest of Colbert's presence in 1932 to the Superintendent of the Santa Fe Indian School that was published in several newspapers. Art educator, Dorothy Dunn, had successfully established a Studio School there that was attracting international attention for the paintings of its Native students.[2] Months before, Colbert, had left New York for good in fragile mental health, relocating to the San Ildefonso pueblo and living alone on a veteran's pension. The Pueblo artists forbade "any outside Indian artists to copy, paint or represent any of our pueblo ceremonial and non-ceremonial dances."[3] Their complaint was primarily economic as they perceived Colbert as an "Indian artist of high standing," and a threat to their income partly dependent on selling paintings. Furthermore, they insisted that if Colbert wanted to paint he should use "pure Chickasaw

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[2] Bruce Bernstein and W. Jackson Rushing, *Modern by Tradition: American Indian Painting in the Studio Style* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Museum of New Mexico Press) 1995.

[3] "Pueblo Indian Artists Protest," *The Art Digest*, Jan. 1, 1933, 32.

materials."[4] This incident also illustrated how Colbert's modernist, pan-indigenous approach was out of step with the emerging Southwest Studio Style of painting, a more traditional, illusionistic approach to modernism, that would come to define Native North American painting until the 1960s.

His comfort with pan-indigenous appropriation explains, in part, Colbert's participation in the Dada inspired "Inje-Inje" group that adopted a similar position of cultural imperialism. The "Inje-Inje" participants imaginatively and absurdly sampled simplistic aspects of remote indigenous tribes, then regurgitated their forms into visual, literary and performing arts that approximated a "red-face minstrel parody."[5] Nevertheless, the practice of cultural appropriation in Colbert's work, which I will illustrate further in this chapter, remains a complicating hallmark of his modernity as an indigenous artist. Among his artist peers, indigenous cultural appropriation was a normalized colonial practice adopted by the European and American avant-garde. Fascinated by ethnography and the artistic vogue of Primitivism, German Expressionist Emil Nolde, painted katsina figures as early as 1911. Transatlantic American painters like Marsden Hartley were drawn to the high desert atmosphere of New Mexico and its Pueblo cultures. He expressed admiration for indigenous practices in published writings, "Tribal Esthetics" (1918), and "Red Man Ceremonials" (1920), that defended Native religious freedom and recognized their rich artistic traditions as something worth preserving and building upon as endemic American aesthetic culture. It is not surprising then, that Colbert appropriated from other indigenous cultures. The difference

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Alan W. Moore, *Holger Cahill's "Inje-Inje" Movement and Frank Overton Colbert*. Unpublished seminar report. New York, N.Y.: City University of New York, Graduate Center, (May 1993), 4. Reviewed in the Jeanne Snodgrass King Collection. Billie Jean Baguley Library and Archives, Heard Museum.

from other Inje-Inje artists was Colbert's transcultural intention of providing some measure of interpretive tribal context for the white audience through his short narrative texts that were displayed with his paintings.

Many of Colbert's "Gods" assumed the form of elemental natural forces: sky, rain, stars, wind, thunder, heat, sunset, rainbow, germination. Animals, usually avian spirit forms, further populate Colbert's pantheon in works like *The Flight of Thunder Bird*, *The Death of the Great Red Eagle,* or *Coming of the Geese from the Second World.* By contrast, the human realm appeared obliquely in his oeuvre, subsumed by larger natural cycles of life, death and regeneration. A rare example of this can be seen in the painting *The Trail to the Happy Hunting Ground* ca. 1921 (Figure 1). Colbert painted a somber nocturnal scene of a sky burial, a common practice among Northern Plains tribes in which the body is wrapped and elevated high above ground on a scaffold left to the natural elements. Several other titles indicated his cosmological concern with origins, as in one of his most exhibited and publicized works *The Origin of Design,* as well as *The Origin of Birds, The Origin of Shooting Stars, The Origin of War* and *The First Thunder.*

Figure 1: Colbert, *Trail to the Happy Hunting Ground*.
Circa 1921, oil on canvas board.

For a deeper analysis of this pan-indigenous pantheon I will focus on a surviving subset of Colbert's paintings. They include several representations of "katsinam,"[6] the supernatural beings central to the religious and ceremonial practices of several indigenous Pueblo tribes of the desert southwest region of the United States, particularly the Zuni and Hopi. Based on the number of images Colbert rendered from Pueblo sources, the ancient katsina religion was a major influence on his work both in terms of a rich religious source and a complex visual iconography dating back centuries. I outline some of the unique characteristics of the Pueblo katsina religion and explain how it informed this subset of paintings. These works are emblematic of Colbert's larger project of hybridizing indigenous iconography with modernist painting styles and techniques.

Katsinam, of which there are estimated to be four hundred unique beings, can be understood in three distinct but related ways: as spirit beings with whom the Hopi interact over their months-long ceremonial calendar, as masked dancers in which individuals can transform when donning the mask, [7] and as carved and painted cottonwood dolls given to children and displayed in homes as a form of religious instruction.[8] Katsina dolls became highly collectible as art objects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when railroads and interstate highways brought white settler traders and eventually tourists to the Pueblo villages of New Mexico and Arizona. Visual representations of katsinam have been documented on ceramics, rock art and kiva murals as far back as A.D. 1350 when the katsina

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[6] I will use the singular term" katsina" or its plural form "katsinam" over the more common variant "kachina."

[7] E. Charles Adams, *The Origin and Development of the Pueblo Katsina Cult* (Tucson, AZ: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1991), 15;

[8] Helga Teiwes and Forman Hanna, *Kachina Dolls: The Art of Hopi Carvers* (Tucson, AZ: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1998), 9.

religion disseminated widely among Pueblo peoples. As Fred Eggan explains, "The Katsinas play an important role in Hopi life as mediators and messengers of the gods. They come periodically to the Hopi villages from December to July as masked dancers to bring gifts to the children and moisture for the bountiful crops for the villages."[9] The katsina religion and its elaborate communal ceremonies express a fundamental reciprocity between the natural (including humans) and spirit worlds. Despite outside suppression by a series of colonial occupiers, from Catholic Spanish missionaries to the United States Federal government, Pueblo tribes have fiercely guarded and secretively nurtured the katsina religion to this day. Significantly, tribes such as the Hopi and Zuni forbade secular visual representation, including photography, of their ceremonial dances. They did not consider their masks and regalia as art objects for outside consumption.

Art historian J.J. Brody traced the transformation of closely guarded katsina imagery in fine art back to Euro-American ethnographers, followed by art patrons who gradually classified them into secular art objects divorced from their spiritual and social functions. This process has been underway since about 1850, and resulted in a major aesthetic shift from iconic and hieratic imagery made pre-contact to current realistic representations demanded by "alien market forces."[10] The iconographic details that evolved for each katsina originated initially from ethnographic sources, ones that Colbert was familiar with, as were many other artists and collectors. Brody's essay documents the development of katsina carving, as well as painting on paper, which became an important new medium for 20th century Hopi artists.

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[9] Fred Eggan,"The Hopi Cosmology," in *Kachinas in the Pueblo World*, ed. Polly Schaafsma (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 9.

[10] J.J. Brody, "Kachina Images in American Art: The Way of the Doll," in *Kachinas in the Pueblo World*, ed. Polly Schaafsma (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 153.

In 1918, Fred Kabotie (ca. 1900-1986) and Otis Polelonema (1902-1981) developed modern katsina imagery that contributed to the influential Southwest style later taught at the Santa Fe Indian School. Colbert's katsina paintings of the same period provide an interesting contrast to his Hopi contemporaries. Far ahead of its time, his work prefigured the approach that Brody observed in much later indigenous painting groups like the Artists Hopid from the 1970s who "synthesize native forms with any of several modernist international art styles," and "modify both formal rules and philosophical values to bring them closer to an alien art-classification system."[11] Brody's larger point was that 20th century makers of katsina images, like Colbert, who was not discussed in his study, "conceptualize changing social relationships between the artists and the intruding world, and they inevitably alter meanings given to kachina images of either group."[12] As I will explore, Colbert's appropriation of katsinam as a subject for modern art production provides insight into his larger transcultural artistic project in which he adapts and preserves stories of pan-indigenous spirituality and folklore. His work functioned as a visual and textual bridge to a predominantly non-native audience.

Colbert's engagement with katsinam was consistent with his creating a codex of indigenous cosmology and was likely activated by personal visits to several Pueblo sites as a young man. By comparing three surviving Colbert paintings of individual katsina spirits, we can identify several common visual attributes, most notably his use of a compositional method called "dynamic symmetry."[13] Works such as *Cipikne*, *Citoto* and *Macibol*, painted circa 1922, are full size portraits of the eponymous supernatural beings. In each work a flat,

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[11] Brody, "Kachina Images," 154.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Jay Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1920).

frontal standing figure occupies the shallow picture plane. The vertical space of each work is organized in quarters by horizontal bands of colors that divide both the figure and the painting in half. The picture space is further subdivided by diagonal zones that inscribe the floating figure within the landscape. Anchored in the top and bottom corners of the canvas, the intersecting diagonals add spatial dimensionality connecting the earth to the sky.

In *Cipikne* (Figure 2), *Citoto* (Figure 3), and *Macibol* (Figure 4), the horizontal plane representing the landscape is rendered in varying proportions of clay-colored red and purple. A distinctive horizon line demarcates the bottom quarter of each canvas, adding weight to the landscape. Where land meets sky, yellow and green shades contrast the lighter air from the darker quarter section of the land below. Colbert abstracted the landscape elements down to simple geometric forms. He commonly painted stepped mesa forms in dense black to frame the left and right edges of the horizon. The flat blocky forms depict the twilight silhouettes of mesas and desert plateaus in the American Southwest, the ancestral home of the Pueblo cultures from which Colbert appropriated this motif. Ascending diagonals symmetrically cross the katsina figures and are mirrored in the upper half of the canvas to create a faceted effect of geometric planes. Within each horizontal quadrant, Colbert alternates the opaque and unmodulated triangular forms with brushier sections of blended colors. The precise diagonals successfully interpenetrate the background and foreground by framing and suspending the spiritual figures close to the surface of a unified geometric color space.

Figure 2: Colbert, *Cipikne*. Circa 1922, oil on canvas board. Figure 3: Colbert, *Citoto*. Circa 1922, oil on canvas board. Figure 4: Colbert, *Macibol*. Circa 1922, oil on canvas board.

In this group of works a consistent compositional method is evident. We know from Colbert's devoted widow, Kate London Colbert, that the artist was influenced by the compositional theory of "dynamic symmetry" that circulated among American art schools circa 1920.[14] Developed by the artist and educator, Jay Hambidge, dynamic symmetry was a design methodology based on a comparative mathematical and geometric analysis of natural forms and human anatomy. He drew inspiration from the shapes and proportions of classical Greek and earlier Egyptian sculpture. According to Hambidge, the Egyptian and Greek cultures were the only ones to develop an understanding of dynamic symmetry – "a method of establishing the relationship of areas in design composition." [15] Colbert saw in the methodology a visual affinity with the flatness of Native North American painting styles, and used the technique extensively in his own works. He once explained his rationale to a reporter:

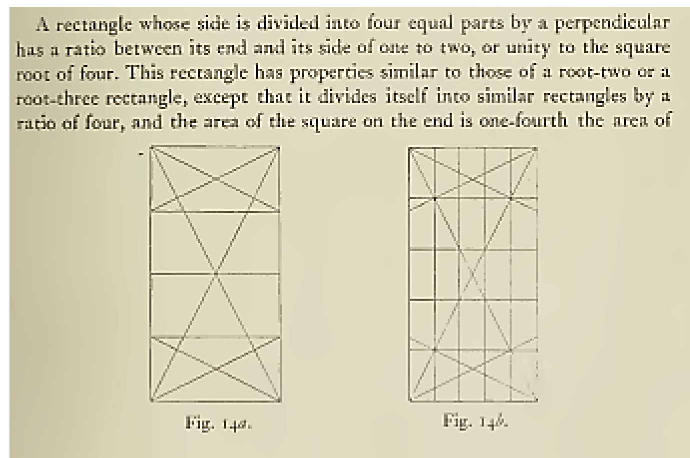
[14] Mrs. Kate L. Colbert, personal letter to Miss Jeanne Snodgrass, March 25, 1964. RC259 (1): 176.1-3. Jeanne Snodgrass King Collection, Billie Jean Baguley Library and Archives, Heard Museum.

[15] Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry*, 8.

> The Indian ignored perspective in art, and projected his objects and symbols on a flat surface because that summed up his philosophy. He believed that all life, in perspective, became flat. To produce any portion of it on a small canvas would reduce it to flatness, he reasoned. But by the transposition of color and the arrangement of large spaces, he produced upon the mind's eye the effect of perspective.[16]

Despite Colbert's studied artistic approach his goal was to retain the simplicity and directness of indigenous art in a stylized form.

Importantly, Hambidge echoed the idea that the multitude of forms found in nature manifested the basic elements of design: the curve, the spiral, the circle, the triangle, the diagonal, the rectangle, etc. as evidenced in the presence of the Golden Ratio of 1.618 and the related Fibonacci sequence. Colbert applied the same mathematical design scheme of dynamic symmetry to the katsina paintings: *Citoto*, *Cipikne*, *Macibol*. The first chapter of Hambidge's book, "The Basis of Design in Nature," outlines the method of dividing the rectangle into equal segments by the use of diagonal and perpendicular lines. Colbert's katsina compositions closely resemble the "root-four rectangle" illustrated by Hambidge in two variations below. (Figure 5)



A rectangle whose side is divided into four equal parts by a perpendicular has a ratio between its end and its side of one to two, or unity to the square root of four. This rectangle has properties similar to those of a root-two or a root-three rectangle, except that it divides itself into similar rectangles by a ratio of four, and the area of the square on the end is one-fourth the area of

Fig. 14*a*. Fig. 14*b*.

Figure 5: Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry*, 15.

[16] Hortense Saunders, "An Oklahoma Indian Gains Fame on Broadway as Great New York Artist," *The Daily Oklahoman*, January 8, 1922.

Following the lineage of ancient Egyptian "masters of figure dissection" analyzed by Hambidge, Colbert inscribes the bodies of his katsina figures in the dynamic criss-crossing lines linking the four corners of the picture (Figure 6).

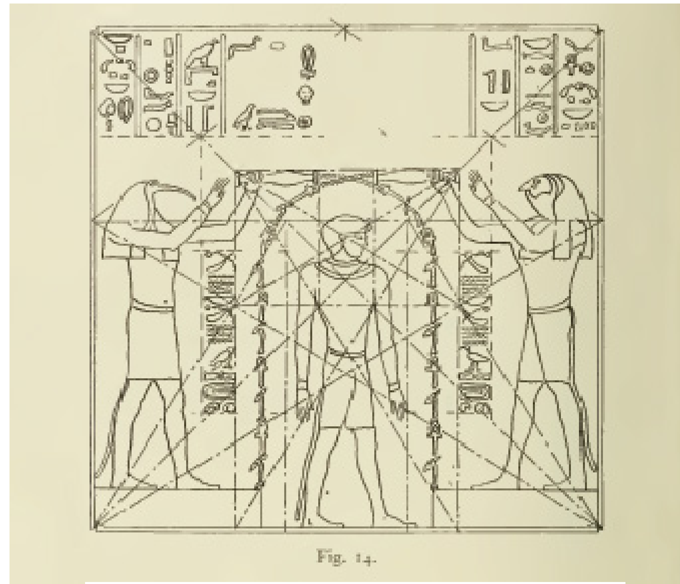


Figure 6: Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry*, 26.

Simultaneously, Colbert's katsina paintings also reflect a consistent Native North American approach to mapping the cosmos in distinct spatial zones. Berlo and Phillips described the importance of indigenous cosmological mapping in visual art: "Everywhere in North America the zones of earth, water and sky are also linked by a central, vertical axis that provides a path of orientation along which human prayers can travel between realms of power."[17] Colbert placed his katsina figures almost exclusively on a central vertical axis with distinctive color schemes for land and sky. His compositions, particularly the use of geometry, strongly suggest cosmological mapping in which his figures function as the intersection of spiritual and elemental forces. "The spirit beings that embody the different cosmic zones are, finally, interconnected by relations of complementarity and

[17] Berlo and Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 23.

oppositionality; these relationships are expressed in myth and illustrated in art by images...that energize cosmic space."[18] The interconnected cosmic relations Berlo and Phillips identified are visible throughout Colbert's oeuvre: a pan-indigenous codex of spirit beings.

The most elaborate can be seen in the work *Coming into the Fifth World Where Light was Found* (Figure 7). Based on Hambidge's root-four rectangle, Colbert composed the blocky katsina figure enveloped in a spectrum of chromatic ray lines, resembling futurist lines of force. The hard edged geometric forms were sensitively balanced in their intersecting areas of color, providing both spatial depth and energetic movement. In the upper half of the picture Colbert employed a brushier handling of paint, adding texture to the composition. He used pointillist optical effects to activate the upper quadrant of the picture, the mythical domain of the Thunderbird.

Figure 7: Colbert, *Coming into the Fifth World Where Light was Found.*
Circa 1921, oil on canvas board.

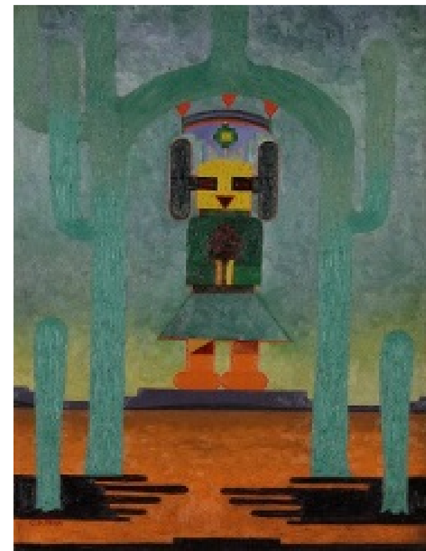


Figure 8: Colbert, *The Rain God and the Cactus*.
Circa 1921, oil on canvas board.

[18] Ibid.

Art historian J.J. Brody outlined three general groups of katsina imagery based on formal qualities. Early imagery, based on carved wood forms, was "stiff, frontal, bilaterally symmetrical and roughly detailed […] gestures are restricted, with forearms held stiffly across the body and more or less parallel to the waist."[19] Colbert rendered this early katsina style in *Coming into the Fifth World Where Light was Found* (Figure 7) and *The Rain God and Cactus* (Figure 8), both painted circa 1921. The katsina figures closely resembled the Pueblo carved doll making tradition while still retaining compositional elements of dynamic symmetry. Around the turn of the twentieth century, a trend toward naturalism appeared. Katsina figures with bifurcated arms and legs, sometimes gesturing, became popular with curio and craft-art markets. Unlike the early iconic katsinam, these figures displayed a more lifelike head to body proportion, and included more iconographic details for the costumes. After the 1930s, the trend shifted further to highly realistic action figures. Steeped in iconographic details prized by non-native collectors, this third category of katsina imagery more closely represents costumed katsina dancers rather than the spirit beings themselves.

The shift toward naturalism can be seen in the trio of Colbert's katsina paintings from circa 1922. In *Cipikne* (Figure 3), *Citoto* (Figure 4), and *Macibol* (Figure 5), the katsina figures are consistently centered on the vertical axis of a root-four rectangle. Each figure is diagonally traversed in the middle of the torso by lines connecting the opposite upper and lower corners. Mirrored triangular shapes frame the upper and lower half of each figure, centering the viewer's eyes on the detailed attributes of each katsina's garment, mask, and headdress. In these three katsina images, Colbert paints more humanistic bodies with strongly articulated arms and legs and functioning hands and feet. Each katsina body is rendered in a

[19] Brody, "Kachina Images," 153.

frontal view holding meaningful objects yet in each the masked heads are turned to the side facing the left edge of the canvas. As I will describe later, Colbert accompanied his paintings with narrative texts to communicate the mythological context for decoding the spiritual function of each katsina.

Colbert's built his geometric compositions around intersecting diagonal areas where he could apply color contrasts and harmonies to create a chromatic framing effect for the figure. He thus emphasized its spiritual significance and energetic potency. For example, in *Macibol* the detailed figure holding a bow shaped snake is centered vertically on the canvas appearing to almost float above the middle two rectangular sections. Its head and feet extend into the top and bottom rectangles. A ground line is evident suggesting *Macibol* is connected to the earthly plane yet simultaneously exists in a purely abstract hieratic space. Symmetrical facets of unmodulated color activate the background: red/purple, green/red/purple/yellow, and purple/maroon are mirrored in the left/right sides of the painting. Colbert experimented with contrasting color combinations that foreground the complex edges of the figures.

When we consider these three images in terms visual perception, specifically the figure-ground relationship, it is evident that Colbert inscribed his figures within the geometric composition to disrupt the viewer's depth perception of a discrete figure against a distant background. In his katsina paintings, the artist created an unified spatial dimension in which the demarcated form of the katsina figure, the landscape and the sky interpenetrate each other through areas of complementary color. Colbert's visual syntax established a sense of both pictorial and cosmological oneness between the figure and its environment. His katsina figures do not read as costumed dancers performing on the ceremonial plaza of the Pueblo. Nor do they appear as carved wooden dolls. They are representations of the spirit

beings themselves, dwelling in a liminal space that resists illusionistic perspective. The suspension of the figures in the abstracted landscape renders the perception of space ambiguous, at least from a Western perspective. The katsinam appear both close and distant due to the combination of flat representation with their suspended position in the composition. They appear in the pictorial world but are not of it.

In researching several of Colbert's obscure painting titles, I came across the work of anthropologist Jesse Walter Fewkes. He conducted the first archaeological and ethnographic studies of the Pueblo cultures of the American Southwest. In the 1880s, Fewkes studied the Hopi religious practices surrounding the closely guarded "cult" of katsinam. He documented a pantheon of spiritual beings intimately connected with Hopi religious and material culture. Fewkes befriended several members of the tribe whom he paid to create watercolor paintings of individual katsinam.[20] Such a practice was forbidden by the Hopi. The Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, where Fewkes would eventually become director, published these paintings accompanied by detailed descriptions in a report titled *Hopi Katcinas Drawn by Native Artists*. To my surprise, I discovered there were unmistakable similarities between the "primitive" representations of the katsinam rendered by traditional Hopi artists and Colbert's modernized interpretations. Was Colbert, as a Chickasaw modern artist, practicing cultural appropriation of Hopi ethnographic drawings? When viewed side by side, we see that Colbert copied the specific positions of the figures, their detailed garments, masks and attributes. Of the traditional Hopi illustration of *Citoto*, Fewkes described its mask in detail:

[20] Jesse Walter Fewkes, *Hopi Katcinas*: *Drawn by Native Artists.* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1903), 13-14. Fewkes briefly credits "Kutcahonauu or White-bear," his uncle "Homovi," and another artist "Winuta."

> Conical or half ovoid, with semicircular alternating parallel bands of red, yellow, green, and black on each side. The mouth has the form of a curved beak, at the base of which is attached a fringe of red horsehair. A cluster of variegated parrot feathers is attached to the back and apex of the mask. Citoto carries a rattle in his right, a pine tree in his left hand.[21]

Colbert's painting (Figure 3), compared side by side with the Hopi watercolor (Figure 9), adopts precisely the same color scheme of the figure with a red torso, yellow forearms, a blanket covering the shoulders, a multicolored skirt tied with a red sash. The mask is nearly identical with its distinctive shape and color bands, feather appendages and protruding beak. Similarly, it holds a rattle in its right hand but Colbert departs slightly from the illustration since his figure holding a branch with leaves instead of a pine tree. What Colbert did with this raw ethnographic imagery was to place *Citoto* in a stylized geometric landscape with diagonal wedges of harmonized color, integrating the direct influence of dynamic symmetry in his painting. We get a sense of Colbert's relationship to traditional tribal forms, his willingness to adapt them to his own pan-indigenous vision, and his transcultural intent to present them in a fine art, rather than ethnographic context.

Figure 3: Colbert, *Citoto*.
Circa 1922, oil on canvas board.

Figure 9: Fewkes, *Citoto*

[21] Ibid, 95.

To take another example, *Cipikne* (Figure 2), Colbert duplicates the exact position of the eponymous figure published in Fewkes's Hopi codex (Figure 10). He renders a side view of the yellow, helmet-like mask with its distinctive circular design referencing the four cardinal directions. The figure holds yucca whips pointing in opposite directions. The trapezoid skirt in Colbert's oil painting retains the black, white and yellow color scheme with identical geometric decoration of triangles, circle and parallel lines. As in *Citoto*, the standing figure of *Cipikne* is firmly inscribed into a land and skyscape. The figure's feet are anchored to the consistently reddish earth painted in the lower quadrant of both pictures. The horizon line beneath the mesa forms symmetrically frames the figure. In the top three rectangular sections, Colbert uses a consistent background arrangement of colors. Yellow/greens depict the atmosphere above the landscape; they are followed by cooling shades of sky blue faceted by intersecting diagonals. The topmost rectangle shows the upper atmosphere. For this section, Colbert uses short, multi-directional brushstrokes modulating the deeper hues of blue, gray, violet and maroon. The method of dividing the picture space with the root-four rectangle and its corresponding diagonals provided Colbert with a precise space to construct and embed his katsinam in a dynamic interconnected chromatic space. Through this composition, he reinforces the power of each spirit being inhabiting elemental spaces of earth, sky and cosmos.

Figure 2: Colbert, *Cipikne*.
Circa 1922, oil on canvas board.

Figure 10: Fewkes, *Cipikne*

Monwu: God of Thought (Figure 11) is a Colbert watercolor representation of a Hopi katsina inspired by another plate in Fewkes's report: the owl woman, "Monwu Wuqti." Though the diagonals in the previous paintings are subtler here, evidence of dynamic symmetry is still visible in the root-four rectangle composition. The decorated skirt for the owl figure constitutes the central triangle shape around which the spatial representation is structured. Departing stylistically from the Hopi source painting (Figure 12), Colbert's *Monwu* is cloaked in a high contrast blue blanket with orange-yellow stripes meeting the viewer's gaze head on. The figure is vertically framed by two columns or ladders of a pueblo village wall with three small window apertures. The artist added texture to the wall with short vertical dabs of purple against a warm orange background. At the top edge of the picture, the inverted gray step form evokes the multistory terraces found in Pueblo architecture.

Figure 11: Colbert, *Monwu.* Circa 1921, gouache on paper.

Figure 12: Fewkes, *Monwu Wuqti*

Monwu is notable as the only existing work to survive with its accompanying narrative text intact. The text, typed in all caps, was adhered to the back of the painting and would have also appeared as a wall text for public exhibition.

> STANDING BY THE WALL OF THE PUEBLO MONWU THINKS THOUGHTS FAR TOO INTRICATE FOR THE HUMAN SOUL, AND ONLY THE WISEST OF MEN CAN FIND ANYTHING IN WHAT MONWU SAYS. SUCH IS THE GOD OF THOUGHT ALL RESPECT AND FEAR LEST THEY READ IN THE WINKING OF AN EYE THE SANCTION OF THEIR FOOLISHNESS. – COLBERT [22]

Only three other examples of Colbert's painting texts have survived, all separated from their corresponding visual works. What are we to make of these writings? He reportedly credited his mother with teaching him the stories of indigenous people as a youth, stating, "She had a poetic nature and appreciated the dramatic quality of the Indian folklore."[23] The artist was also known to seek out traditional members of his tribe and others he encountered to listen to their stories. Because his writings have

[22] Ader Nordmann Art Impressionniste & Moderne auction catalogue. Paris (May 18, 2018): 88.

[23] Saunders, "An Oklahoma Indian Gains Fame."

narrative, expository or interpretive qualities, mentioning the titular katsinam by name, it is relevant to remember the original purpose of making carved wooden dolls of katsinam. Among Pueblo cultures, the dolls were used to introduce and educate children about their tribal mythologies, ceremonies and spiritual traditions. The artist seems to have had this in mind in displaying his "explanations" to an overwhelmingly white urban audience. Indeed, Colbert's written "explanations" for his paintings gained critical attention following his first solo exhibition in New York. His written text for the painting *The Origin of Shooting Stars* was transcribed verbatim by a prominent art critic who was inspired by the poetic novelty of indigenous cosmology.[24]

In the text for his *Tumas* painting, the didactic nature of the story is more evident with an incumbent moral lesson for children:

> TUMAS IS THE MOTHER OF TUNWUP AND TO HER IS GIVEN THE DUTY OF HELPING FLOG THE CHILDREN. WHEN THE DEMONS GO AROUND COLLECTING THE FOOD WHICH THEY HAVE PREVIOUSLY GIVEN SNARES TO EACH TO CATCH, TUMAS HOLDS THE FOOD GIVEN, AND ALL THE CHILDREN ARE AFRAID OF HER AS ALL YOUNG THINGS DO NOT LIKE TO BE TAUGHT TO DO THE RIGHT AND GOOD THINGS BEST FOR THEM. - COLBERT (HOPI)[25]

Colbert importantly cites the tribal source of the painting's figure, *Tumas*, and its mythological context, indicating that his appropriation from tribal cultures outside his own Chickasaw identity was intentionally transcultural.

We can glean from a selection of Colbert's existing paintings that he was interested in painting pan-indigenous mythologies, particularly those of the Pueblo cultures. Colbert's

[24] Colbert's text quoted by Hamilton Easter Field, *The Arts*, Feb.-Mar., 1921, 38.

[25] Colbert, *Tumas*, photocopy of typewritten text. Oklahoma History Center, Oklahoma City.

appropriation of pre-existing Hopi watercolors, collected in an ethnographic context, adds to the complexity and modernity of his artistic practice. It was consistent with his "civilized" mixed blood Chickasaw heritage that viewed indigenous oral traditions and art practices from the perspective of European folklore and ethnology. He was fully aligned with many of his peers in New York; his Inje-Inje collaborator John Sloan, for example, shared a passion for modernist Primitivism inspired by the American Southwest, particularly New Mexico.[26] Influenced by Jay Hambidge's theory of dynamic symmetry, Colbert developed a geometric painting style that provided strong compositional spaces within the picture plane and permitted him to experiment with color as well as figure-ground relationships. His katsina paintings demonstrate the consistent use of the root-four rectangle to inscribe his figures in a unified pictorial and cosmological space. He translated oral tribal stories into narrative texts that were displayed with his paintings to help the viewer interpret them. In doing so, I argue, Colbert occupied an unusual pan-indigenous, transcultural position toward his primarily Euro-American audience. In the following chapter, I will review Colbert's exhibition history and the critical reception to his work. I will consider his circulation among the avant-garde artistic communities and the encounters he provoked between indigeneity and modernity.

[26] W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), 1995.

CHAPTER 3

EXHIBITION HISTORY AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

Frank Overton Colbert, an educated, well-travelled young man, with two years of WWI naval service under his belt, burst onto New York's art scene with an entirely original artistic vision that syncretized modernist painting techniques with exclusively pan-indigenous subject matter. In this chapter, I will examine Colbert's groundbreaking, if obscured, artistic contribution during an emergent period of American modernism in visual arts. Through documentation of his exhibition history and its critical reception, particularly his time in New York, I will show that Frank Overton Colbert was the forerunner of a hybrid pan-indigenous American modernism.

In August of 1919, Colbert was discharged from the U.S. Navy where he designed bold geometric camouflage patterns for ships evading detection by enemy submarines. Also known as dazzle camouflage, the ship painting technique combined optical science with visual art. The experience of military *camoufleurs* in the WWI era served numerous modern painters well, including Thomas Hart Benton. Thanks to this work, they developed their fluency in geometric abstraction, working at monumental scale and expanding the limits of pictorial space. Within a matter of months Colbert made his way to New York City, Greenwich Village specifically, to pursue his artistic dreams. Colbert's first documented exhibition took place at the end of December 1920 at Vermeer Studios, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Ella Mabel Clark, wealthy arts patron, animal activist, and housing reformer, purposefully built Vermeer Studios as two side-by-side apartment buildings for low-income artists including an exhibition space.[1] Exhibiting under the name F. Overton

[1] Christopher Gray, "An Early Haven for Artists," *New York Times*, December 2, 2007.

Colbert, his "interesting exhibition of Indian folk lore subjects" registered impressions in the art press. Most reviews of Colbert's works highlighted his "Indian descent," obvious familiarity with his subject matter, and his artistic skill as "a good colorist and draughtsman."[2] Art critics struggled to reconcile the modernity of Colbert's approach with the problematic trope of indigenous culture as necessarily primitive. Furthermore, the artist's personality began to be framed as an entanglement of savage versus civilized impulses, pitting his indigenous identity in conflict with his Euro-American upbringing.

The following month, in January 1921, his career quickly gained momentum. Colbert opened the first of three solo exhibitions at the well-established Montross Gallery at 550 Fifth Avenue where he showed thirty paintings. Founded in 1878 by Newman Emerson Montross, it was one of the few commercial galleries in New York consistently exhibiting modern art produced by Americans. Colbert's sudden inclusion in the Montross exhibition calendar was a novelty that immediately attracted the attention of several prominent art critics.

Pierre Loving, writing in the progressive weekly magazine *The Nation,* gave a thoughtful analysis of Colbert's painting. Loving responded positively to its "flat decorative surfaces" and "to the engaging symbolism of color and design such as we find in primitive art everywhere." [3] He, like several critics to follow, tended to overlook Colbert's fine art training at the Washington (D.C.) School of Art and the New York School of Fine and Applied Art. They instead linked his abstract style back to traditional indigenous art forms,

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[2] "Indian Folk Lore Pictures," *American Art News*, January 1, 1921.

[3] Pierre Loving, "An American Painter." *The Nation*, January 26, 1921.

by noting “the symmetrical principle which is derived from the calling of the basket-maker.”[4] His favorable review of the exhibition emphasized Colbert’s masterful portrayal of “katchinas or gods or demigods of the Indians.”[5] He discussed the artist’s theory and practice of color transition, how he studied the color shadings of red peppers and tomatoes, and applied paint in layers of contrasting pigments to achieve a “special richness of tone ensemble.” [6]

As the title “An American Painter” indicated, Loving framed Colbert’s work in the wider context of contemporary American art of the period rather than relegating it to “Indian” art. He observed the “groping” among postwar American artists “for a pure indigenous idiom on canvas.”[7] This questionable search for nationalist authenticity in the face of dehumanizing urbanism and the postwar hangover of European artistic influence was a pointed critique of the New York avant-garde’s recent fascination with the Pueblo cultures surrounding Santa Fe, New Mexico. As I mentioned in chapter two, Marsden Hartley and John Sloan were among the most vocal advocates for indigenous aesthetics as the basis for a national art. Colbert, by contrast, came by it honestly, expressing “his own personality while expressing the racial traits of the Red Man” that gave him “an unmistakable touch of originality.”[8] His pan-indigenous approach and use of modern materials went unquestioned by critics otherwise unfamiliar with Native North American painting of the period. The artist confidently occupied a position of cultural translator.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

Furthermore, Loving's text demonstrated the shifting Euro-American understanding of Native North American culture in sympathetic yet primitive terms. While the author uses the generic descriptor of "American Indian" referring to the artist, he acknowledges Colbert's Chickasaw tribal affiliation, framing it in the popular ethnographic trope of "rapidly dwindling fragments" of indigenous civilization.[9] This white settler tendency to historicize indigenous culture in a dead or dying past was echoed by Hamilton Easter Field, an influential artist, critic, collector and patron of modern art. In his review's lead line, "The art of our native Indians is not dead nor is their wonderful folk-lore," he unambiguously endorsed the exhibition of the "full-blooded Indian" and quoted in full one of Colbert's descriptive "explanations" that were displayed with each painting.[10] Soon after his first Montross exhibition closed, Colbert gave a public presentation in Greenwich Village entitled "What the American Indian has Accomplished in Art and Literature. Assisted by a company of Indian Artists, Interpretive Dances, Tom Tom Music, etc."[11] In this way, the artist's agency as transcultural interpreter, Native North American cultural advocate, and performing artist was evident for its intended Euro-American audience.

The day before Colbert's first Montross show closed, the *New York Times* weighed in on his "very formal little pictures, often brilliant, occasionally satiric, invariably arresting, but never too deeply expressive."[12] The author credited the work as being the original kind of

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Hamilton Easter Field, "One-Man Shows at Many Galleries," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 30, 1921.

[11] Paper ephemera, "F. Overton Colbert, Chikasaw Indian, Christine's, 45 Grove St.," February 28, 1921.

[12] "THE WORLD OF ART: Exhibitions and Opinions," *New York Times*, February 6, 1921.

American art "diluted with conscious stylism."[13] The review mentioned Colbert's academic training, and his use of color "combined with considerable science, augmented by racial tact."[14] In describing the typewritten texts for each painting the author perceived the dual nature of Colbert's identity: "There is something in them of primitive, sensitive, bold, sly humanity, the humanity that knows nothing of fetters, at least not the fetters of European civilization; and also there is something in them of the European who looks in critical detachment at this own soul and describes it."[15] The writer recognized the tension manifested in the work by a modernist outsider and indigenous insider. Notably, it was the first time one of Colbert's paintings was reproduced in print. *The Origin of Design* (circa 1920) (Figure 13), would become one of his most exhibited works, included in his posthumous 1963 retrospective. It was featured on the cover of the May 18, 2018 Ader-Nordmann auction catalogue where it sold with several other Colbert paintings.

Figure 13: Colbert, *The Origin of Design*

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

The painting was emblematic of Colbert's use of "dynamic symmetry," as seen in the hard edged curved form soaring upward like a gust of wind across the canvas. Layers of dabbed paint in contrasting bands of warm and cool colors animate the picture surface, adding volume to the abstract shape. The curved form emanates from a painted spiral on the clay bulge of the chimenea; its ovoid shape echoes as a mysterious aperture to the sky, in the upper left corner. Colbert simplified the landscape to a shallow red ground with flat triangular mountains distanced by darker or lighter colors. The sky space displayed more painterly brushstrokes as he modulated the shifting colors of atmospheric twilight.

Colbert gravitated to the convivial membership of the Whitney Studio Club founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the forward thinking sculptor and patron of emerging American modern art. As a collector and artist in her own right, she cultivated openness to the avant-garde impulses in American art. Her exhibition space was a key foothold for a generation of American artists experimenting with modernism, many without commercial success or critical recognition. Whitney's collection, assembled during the time of the Studio Club from 1914 to 1928, became the basis for the Whitney Museum of American Art founded in 1930. Colbert participated in their annual member's exhibition in March 1921, exhibiting three of his paintings alongside an impressive roster of canonized American artists that included Rockwell Kent, John Sloan, William Glackens, Stuart Davis, and Edward Hopper.[16] If the number of landscapes, still lifes and portraits exhibited were an indication, Colbert was among the small minority of American modern artists working in pictorial

[16] "Catalogue of the Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by Members of the Whitney Studio Club," March 20-April 20, 1921. Whitney Museum Library, Whitney Studio Club and Galleries: Administrative and Exhibition Records, 1907-1930. https://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15405coll1/id/779 (Accessed April 13, 2015).

abstraction or geometric composition. Art historians Barbara Rose and Abraham Davidson observed that by 1920 many prominent American modernists like Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, Thomas Hart Benton and Max Weber turned away from abstraction in the disillusioned postwar period.[17] Or more correctly, these artists passed through it, embraced various modern styles and approaches along the way, and, like Colbert, can be associated with multiple art movements.

His works displayed visual affinities to several transatlantic stylistic movements of his time. For example, Colbert's skilled use of color harmonies was comparable to that of the Paris-based American Synchromists, Morgan Russell and Stanton MacDonald-Wright, who also experimented with cubo-futurist chromatic forms. In addition to this, several works in this study, like *The Origin of Birds* (circa 1921), revealed his compact brushwork, use of pointillism, and application of paint emphasizing optical qualities, all techniques developed by French Post-Impressionism. The geometric abstraction Colbert used in several of his katsina paintings shares a common visual language with Joseph Stella's treatment of architecture of urban space in his canonical *Brooklyn Bridge* (1919-20), or Charles Demuth's Precisionist depictions of industrial landscapes. In terms of modern Primitivism, Colbert occupied a controversial stance, as a mixed-race Chickasaw who appropriated indigenous subject matter for secular visual art.

Further evidence of Colbert's widening artistic circle and commercial viability could be seen in an advertisement for "An Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture" at the Wanamaker Gallery, a branch of the arts oriented Wanamaker's department store. The

[17] Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History*, (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1968), 113; Abraham A. Davidson *Early American Modernist Painting: 1910-1935*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 159.

spring exhibition of 1921 listed Colbert among thirty-nine artists represented in the four-week show. Among them were Thomas Benton, Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, Leon Kroll, Man Ray, Joseph Stella, and Max Weber.[18] Several of these artists were also members of the Whitney Studio Club and moved in the circles of modernist patrons like Alfred Stieglitz and Walter Arensberg. This suggests that Colbert participated extensively in the New York modernist groups, likely absorbing formal elements of Expressionism, Dada, American Cubism, Futurism, and Precisionism. As the art press shows, it had become expected for American moderns to move through multiple stylistic shifts before and after the influential 1913 Armory Show.

1921 continued to be a breakout year for the young artist. No doubt seeking to capitalize on the novelty of his work, the Montross Gallery invited him to exhibit a second solo show in late November of the same year: “Indian folk lore pictures by F. Overton Colbert." Overlapping the final week of his show at Montross were paintings and drawings by George Bellows. For a second time, the art critic Hamilton Easter Field, as enamored with Colbert’s text based “legends” as with the paintings themselves, transcribed one of them, *Death of the Great Red Eagle*, verbatim in his review. About the paintings and the artist’s hybrid, transcultural practice, he commented, **“**Full in color, rich in its fancy, his work stands alone so far as I know in being based on the ancient Indian art and yet possessing attributes which come from his close contact with our civilization.”[19] Field, like many critics of the period, sensed the hybrid qualities in Colbert’s work, but succumbed to historicizing indigenous culture in a dead, distant past, just as they assumed the inferiority of pre-modern

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[18] *New-York Tribune*, April 25, 1921, 18.

[19] Hamilton Easter Field, “Works of Art in Various Shows,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 18, 1921.

cultures as primitive. They failed to recognize how the artist was asserting the modernity of indigenous spirituality in his paintings and didactic texts.

An anonymous reviewer for *American Art News* mentioned Colbert's mediums as oils, watercolors and crayon sketches and pointed to some of the formal influences on his work:

> The vivid colors typical of almost all his pictures are arranged in accordance with the color theory of the Metropolitan School of Art where he has recently been studying…Straight lines and geometric forms characterize most of his designs. Some seem to suggest a kinship with the Cubists though they are not the result of any affiliation with them.[20]

In this instance, the reviewer noted Colbert's visual affinity with existing art movements, but emphasized his independence from them. Again, Colbert's critical reception is slippery, as his work evaded obvious influences of either traditional indigenous art forms or modalities of modern art. It speaks to the originality of his pan-indigenous vision, the versatility of his technique and his adept handling of materials to which critics grasped to find comparisons. It also reveals how few writers of the period were comfortable with reviewing modern art, much less Native North American art which had scarcely been exhibited in New York.

Frederick W. Eddy, who reviewed Colbert's second Montross exhibition , commented that the artist had spent one-third of his 26 years in the study of art. He praised the "archaic simplicity and directness in the delineation which strikes one as inborn and not to be acquired."[21] Surely, markers of the artist's training and skill were evident in his economic portrayal of landscape in which "a few strokes indicate the ruddy desert or the towering peaks or the shimmer of the atmosphere in broken color or the adobe dwellings in

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[20] "Colbert's Indian Myth Subjects." *American Art News*, December 3, 1921.

[21] Frederick W. Eddy, "Chickasaw Indian Exhibits Paintings in Gotham Gallery", *The Indianapolis Star* January 1, 1922, 16.

his home settlement,"[22] not to mention his highly organized compositions influenced by dynamic symmetry and his richly detailed figuration.

1922 saw Colbert's artistic profile becoming established in and beyond New York. Twice that spring, he showed work at the Whitney Studio Club. The first was a group show of eight painters, including another WWI *camoufleur*, Kimon Nicolaides. It brought to the surface the deep division in American art of the postwar period. The press observed a balance between "Conservatives" (representational) and "Modernists" (abstract). Colbert, having achieved some measure of recognition, was referred to as "the Indian artist." One of his paintings was described as "reminiscent of the Assyrians," presumably due its geometric composition, flat figuration and non-European subject matter.[23] Several weeks later Colbert showed two paintings in the annual members' exhibition along with abstract modernists Joseph Stella, Stuart Davis, and Greenwich Village residents, John Sloan and Edward Hopper, on the realist end of the spectrum.[24]

Colbert's most significant New York show of 1922 was the Architectural League of New York 37th Annual Exhibition at the Fine Arts Building on West 57th, home to the Art Students League. With two images of his artworks reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, Colbert exhibited twenty-five paintings in the Decoration section. His contribution was noted

[22] Ibid.

[23] "Eight Painters in Balanced Show." *American Art News*, February 18, 1922.

[24] "Catalogue of the Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture by Members of the Whitney Studio Club," April 1922. Whitney Museum Library, Whitney Studio Club and Galleries: Administrative and Exhibition Records, 1907-1930. http://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15405coll1/id/567/rec/2, (Accessed April 13, 2015).

in the *New York Times* as “many small designs made with fine short strokes suggesting an ultimate interpretation in needlework.”[25] The placement of his work in this context stood out insofar as both its indigenous and modernist qualities were incongruous with the otherwise classical, historical, Orientalist, or sentimental genre paintings represented by the jury.

In March 1922, Colbert’s work traveled to Denver, Colorado as part of a “Loan Exhibition of Contemporary American Indian Art” hosted by the Denver Art Association. The reviewer stated it “was a distinct revelation to many” because it featured articles of wear and use, as well as pictures “representing Indian ceremonials.” Colbert was the only artist mentioned by name. This may be the first instance of his work shown with fellow Native North American artists.[26] Soon after, the Mattatuck Historical Society in Waterbury, Connecticut held a solo exhibition of Colbert’s paintings and invited him to present his public lecture on “What the American Indian Has to Give Art and Literature.”[27] He was more confident than ever in articulating his experience as an indigenous advocate and transcultural interpreter for the white audience.

News of Colbert’s artistic success “back east” was starting to travel. In the autumn of 1922, more exhibition and sales opportunities beckoned in his home state of Oklahoma, where he returned to visit family and speak publicly about his work. In October 1922, the Oklahoma Association of Artists sponsored the "Exhibition of Indian Paintings by F. Overton

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[25] “THE WORLD OF ART: Houses, Maps, People and Dolls.” *New York Times*. February 5, 1922.

[26] M.R.F. Valle, “Denver,” *American Art News*, March 25, 1922. It is not clear who organized or traveled the loaned exhibition.

[27] “Waterbury, Conn.” *American Art News*, April 8, 1922.

Colbert" at Tulsa's Central High School, featuring more than fifty works.[28] The *Sunday Tulsa World* ran a lengthy feature story on Colbert with a reproduction of his figurative katsina painting *Buli Mana* and a photograph of the artist in profile, notably in modern dress. [29]

The uncredited journalist provided insight into Colbert's European artistic training, the disapproval of his family, and his extensive journeys. Wherever he encountered Native people in his travels: Hopi, Navajo, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Sioux, he studied their lifeways, stories, and religious rites. The article identified Colbert's earnest desire to pass on indigenous myths and symbolism to the modern generation or as the author casually framed it; "primitive thoughts and impulses of the red people."[30] The writer indulged in Native North American racial stereotypes common in popular cinema referring to Colbert's "wigwam" studio in the "land of his fathers" where he worked in his native costume. Colbert claimed to be a skilled trick shooter and an acquaintance of the adventurer and showman Buffalo Bill Cody. He reportedly told Colbert, "Red Feather, you dip your brush in the rainbow and paint the Indian from the soul of all generations of Indians with the philosophy and precision of European thought."[31] Again the theme of a split identity runs through narratives about Colbert's work; he adapted pan-indigenous mythology rooted in oral traditions and visually translated it in distinctive Euro-American modernist style.

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[28] "Exhibition of Indian Paintings by F. Overton Colbert, October 9-21, 1922." Tulsa, OK Central High School Art Department and the Oklahoma Association of Artists, October 1922. Series 1: Correspondence and personal papers: A-E. 3:12. University of Tulsa McFarlin Library Special Collections: J.B. Milam Papers.

[29] "An Indian Artist with a Native Art," *The Sunday Tulsa Daily World*, October 8, 1922.

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

The article also discussed Colbert in a contemporary literary and performative context comparing him to two prominent writers of the time. The author asserted that “He is as essentially American in his work as Anderson or Hergesheimer are in theirs."[32] Colbert’s strong interest in writing and his participation in amateur theatricals put on by his Greenwich Village writer friends was noted. The writer quoted poet Harry Kemp commenting on Colbert’s hard won acting abilities. In a curious foreshadowing, the reporter said that Beaux-Arts sculptor Paul Wayland Bartlett “was deeply interested in Colbert and plans to sponsor him soon in Paris."[33] Understandably, Colbert’s ambitions to go abroad were rising due to his unprecedented success in New York.

A month later, in December 1922 Colbert was in Bryan County, his birthplace near the Red River in southern Oklahoma. It seems his plans had become more explicit as a front-page story in the local paper touted, “Famous Artist Here on Visit Prior to Trip to Europe.”[34] Perhaps it was a case of *You Can’t Go Home Again* or the star struck small town press, but Colbert’s artistic reputation was increasingly amplified. His association with “the world’s greatest modern sculptor” Paul Wayland Bartlett was again noted as were his plans to sail to Paris following his third exhibition at Montross Gallery. It was also said that his paintings brought as much as $3,000 per picture. According to the article, he was already a “splendid conversationalist in both the French and Italian languages”[35] and had at his disposal studios in Paris and Florence.

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] “Famous Artist Here On Visit Prior to Trip to Europe.” *Saturday Morning Advertiser*, Durant, OK, December 9, 1922.

[35] Ibid.

On January 5, 1923, Colbert's third exhibition in two years opened at Montross Galleries with 62 paintings on display.[36] The art press indicated its familiarity with his 20th century modern technique describing his works as **"**pure masses of flat color in designs which are frequently geometric**.**"[37] Yet the criticism of his work continued to define Indian artistic expression as necessarily "primitive." This was in fact a kind of compliment in the context of American modernist painters of the period yearning for elusive authenticity. As one critic put it, "Many of our painters have been trying to get fresh inspiration from Indian art, and trying to burn out the 'isms' of modern painting in the heat of a New Mexican sun. Mr. Colbert has remained so near the source of direct and primitive expression that no veneer of academic training can dull it for him."[38] The same writer talked about Colbert's enlightening explanations of the pictures in the gallery, especially when costumed as an "Indian chief." *The New York Times* observed of his works in the third Montross show: "so many of them resemble the items in an earlier exhibition that it is only necessary to call attention to the strong decorative arrangements and the natural expression of emotions and events in terms of abstract symbol."[39] As with other critics, the imaginative titles and explanatory texts accompanying the paintings drew as much comment as the works themselves.

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[36] "Indian Folk Lore Pictures Painted by F. Overton Colbert, Chickasaw Indian, January 5-20, 1923." Series 5 Box 3 Reel 4859. Miscellaneous art exhibition catalog collection, 1813-1953, bulk 1915-1925. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[37] "Indian Pictures by an Indian," *American Art News*, January 13, 1923.

[38] "Impressions of the Galleries," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1923.

[39] "Indian Pictures," *New York Times*, January 14, 1923.

Later that spring Colbert participated in two more exhibitions: a two-person show with sculptress Renee Prahar at her Greenwich Village studio and, for the third consecutive year, he participated in the Whitney Studio Club annual exhibition of paintings and sculpture. In June of 1923, Colbert applied for a United States passport listing several countries he planned to visit for the purpose of study: France, Germany, British Isles, Spain, Italy and Egypt.[40]

Colbert made it to Paris that summer and found himself in the thick of another artistic hotbed, Montparnasse, according to the newspapers. In December of 1923, Colbert proved his uncanny knack for publicity with a sensational photographic image in *The New York Times* Rotogravure Picture Section. In this photo he conspicuously posed in a feathered headdress, notably inconsistent with Chickasaw regalia. The caption referred to the artist as "François Overton Colbert…known as Red Feather, Last Chief of the Chickasaw Indians,"[41] who had relocated to Paris. Early in 1924, Colbert, "a foremost modern painter," was reported to have done a "war dance in his beads and feathers" before the newsreel cameras haunting the grand cafes of Montparnasse.[42] Dressed in buckskins and headdress, Colbert, was known to make drawings while mixing with artists, tourists and bohemian denizens. For example, the same article mentioned Colbert's encounter with the accomplished African-

[40] "Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925," June 12, 1923. Roll #: 2301; Volume #: Roll 2301 - Certificates: 307850-308349, 12 Jun 1923-13 Jun 1923. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

[41] "IMMORTALIZING THE ARTS OF HIS FATHERS," *New York Times*, December 16, 1923.

[42] Sterling Heiling,"Tourists Buy Pictures, as Art Comes to All the World," *The Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), June 9, 1924.

American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner at the Café du Dome[43]. The performative quality of his presence on Paris's left bank earned him the nickname "The Redskin of Montparnasse."[44]

Though Colbert's exhibitions in Paris were harder to come by than in New York, he continued to evolve his painting style without departing from his subject matter. He participated in the 1923 Salon d'Automne with a figurative painting of *The Undersea God.*[45] In it, he used small compact brush strokes and a pointillist technique to evoke an almost surrealist underwater scene of jellyfish, tropical fish and a slightly more modeled figure of a female "god." He is said to have shown with the Groupe du Parnasse in 1924, and he exhibited a painting and a drawing in the 1926 Salon des Artistes Indépendants.[46] Significantly, Colbert's personal life had complicated matters of art making. He married Kate Gittel London, a Brooklyn native and first generation Polish Jewish immigrant while both were in France. They had a son, born Robert Holmes Colbert on April 8, 1926, in Neuilly. Mr. & Mrs. Colbert returned with their son to New York on the S.S. George Washington on June 4, 1926.[47] According to his wife, they separated soon after due to an unspecified "breakdown" that he suffered. Though their marriage was annulled in 1933, Kate Colbert

[43] Ibid.

[44] "COLBERT, François Overton Redfeather." *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, n.d. Oxford Art Online. (Accessed January 28, 2015.)

[45] "Salon d'Automne," exhibition catalogue (Paris: Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, November 1 – December 16, 1923), 127.

[46] "Société des Artistes Indépendants, 37th exposition Salon," exhibition catalogue (Paris: Palais de Bois, March 20–May 2, 1926), 82.

[47] "Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897-1957." June 4, 1926. Microfilm Publication T715, 8892 rolls. Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service; National Archives at Washington, D.C.

kept her husband's name and maintained contact with his extended family throughout the rest of her long life.[48]

Frank Overton Colbert scarcely exhibited again in his lifetime. A revealing, tragic letter from 1931, written by Colbert's friend and artistic colleague Renee Prahar to his father, stated she had noticed Colbert was "unbalanced" while in France several years before and had, at one point, checked himself into a private sanitarium for several months.[49] The purpose of the letter was informing Colbert's father that she had gotten the artist out of the Bellevue "psychopathic" ward where he was under observation. Prahar had just put Colbert on a train back to his family home in Calera, Oklahoma in order to prevent him from being committed to a state insane asylum despite his "absolute harmlessness." Prahar described the artist's five years of difficulties since returning from Paris with wife and infant. His mental health deteriorated because of city life, financial pressures, and an unresolved dispute with his brother-in-law.

In 1932 Colbert moved to the San Ildefonso Pueblo near Santa Fe, New Mexico where he lived alone on a meager U.S. Veterans pension.[50] His modern approach to painting was not welcomed by the Indian artists of the area. A group of six pueblo artists publicly complained that he was attempting to paint their dances without permission and was interfering with their livelihood. Nevertheless, he remained there for a decade, until he was

[48] Kate London Colbert, "Handwritten Letter to Miss Jeanne Snodgrass in Tulsa, OK." March 25, 1964. RC259 (1): 176.1-3. Jeanne Snodgrass King Collection, Billie Jean Baguley Library and Archives, Heard Museum.

[49] Renee Prahar, "Personal letter to Mr. Holmes Colbert," May 13, 1931. Private collection.

[50] Frank Overton Colbert, "Handwritten Letter to Mr. John H. Storrs," April 4, 1934, Box 3, Folder 9, Documents 25-29. John Storrs Correspondence: General Correspondence, 1931-1934 John Henry Bradley Storrs papers, 1837-1996, bulk 1900-1956, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

committed to the Veterans Administration Neuropsychiatry Hospital in Fort Lyon, Colorado in 1941.[51] He died and was buried at Fort Lyon in 1953.

In the decades following his death, Kate Colbert continuously made efforts to ensure her husband's artistic legacy. She donated eight of his paintings to the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1961, four of which survive there today. In 1963, she arranged for a retrospective exhibition of one-hundred paintings and drawings at Galerie Paula Insel in New York City.[52] Additionally she provided much of what we know of Colbert's life and career to the initial publication of *American Indian Painters: A Biographical Directory* in 1968. Despite her persistent efforts, the brevity of Colbert's artistic achievements in the 1920s compounded by decades of scholarly and commercial neglect, acted as a fog shrouding Colbert's extraordinary pan-indigenous contribution to early American modernism.

There are several conclusions we can draw from the artist's exhibition history and critical reception. First of all Colbert's work is unusual and difficult to classify. He practically comes out of nowhere with a highly original vision combined with intensely studied skill. The critics unanimously commented on his adept handling of color, innate design sense, attention to detail, restrained use of geometric abstraction, and his written texts. We also learn of the performative aspects of Colbert's public persona, his ability to generate publicity, his dress in traditional garments, and his willingness to communicate indigeneity through his art, writing and performance. We also gain insight into the hybridity of his project as reflected in a painfully split identity. On the cusp of his early fame in New York, one perceptive writer observed, "He became divided into a sort of double personality, the

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[51] Alan W. Moore, "F. Overton Colbert: Forgotten Chickasaw Modernist." *The Journal of Chickasaw History* 3, no. 3 (1997): 9–17.

[52] "Press Release, Galerie Paula Insel," March 11, 1963.

native and the civilized, and it was point of pride with him to distinguish sharply between the two, and raise both to a high degree of intensity."[53] So it was with Colbert's small, intense paintings.

This leads us to the following questions. How should art historians understand Frank Overton Colbert's contributions to American modernist painting? Furthermore, how does Colbert's work relate to other founders of Native North American modernism? Are there contemporary indigenous theorists who can shed light on Colbert's forward thinking, hybrid approach to indigenous modern art? In the following chapter I will propose new ways of interpreting Colbert's work as both "trans-customary" and "postindian."

[53] Louis Bernheimer quoted in Alan W. Moore, "F. Overton Colbert: Forgotten Chickasaw Modernist," 13.

CHAPTER 4

TRANS-CUSTOMARY ART PRACTICE AND POSTINDIAN SURVIVANCE

One century since Colbert's most active and accomplished period in New York, art historians have come to recognize a multitude of modernisms that co-evolved, sometimes independently, often cross-culturally, in a more or less synchronous manner. As a self-identifying Chickasaw "Indian" artist painting exclusively indigenous subject matter for a largely Euro-American audience, Colbert established an unprecedented indigenous presence in New York's modern art scene. In this chapter I will consider Colbert's larger artistic project from the perspectives of two indigenous knowledge systems that specifically address visual and textual culture.

Both contemporary theories, Robert Jahnke's concept of "trans-customary" practices among indigenous artists and Gerald Vizenor's literary theories of "postindian survivance," apply retrospectively to Colbert's project. These approaches illuminate how his work provoked a far-reaching, unresolved encounter of indigeneity and modernity. I will begin with the background context for "trans-customary" art and propose that Colbert's unorthodox, pan-indigenous oeuvre was a modernist turn, involving the appropriation and adaptation of traditional tribal iconographies. Later in the chapter, I will suggest that Colbert's project, while controversial, offers a compelling example of Vizenor's indigenous cultural "survivance," a creative strategy of survival, perseverance, and resistance to a hostile culture of colonial dominance, exploitation, and erasure.

Robert Jahnke is a Maori artist, writer, curator and educator who developed the indigenous pedagogical model for the Maori Visual Arts curriculum at New Zealand's Massey University where he is currently a professor. As an artist, his work focuses on the

dynamics of inter-cultural exchange and the politics of identity, both of which figure prominently in Colbert's oeuvre. Jahnke's art historical research into art created by Maori identified three definitive forms of indigenous art practice that are instructive here: the customary or traditional art practice, the trans-customary or trans-traditional, and the non-customary or non-traditional.

Jahnke proposed this spectrum to locate how contemporary Maori artists responded to external changes in traditional Maori art practices and iconography. He was interested in the perceptual relationship that contemporary artists had with historical models and investigated to what extent artists modified customary forms while still retaining "visual empathy" with them, thereby maintaining their relevance and legibility to Maori spectators. Jahnke theorized that the visual empathy produced by modification of traditional forms was at the heart of the trans-customary paradigm.[1] He contrasted this with customary artists' more mimetic reiteration of "visual correspondence" in which they made little or no modifications to traditional historical forms. At the other end of the spectrum, non-customary artists modified historical forms to the point of obscurity, effectively alienating the tribal audience's capacity for visual empathy, but thereby increasing its legibility to a non-native audience. The importance of Jahnke's theories to this study is to suggest that there was no purely authentic Native North American art produced in the modern period. Trans-customary artists like Colbert relied heavily on historical models but freely modified them to modernist practice,

[1] Robert Jahnke, "Toioho ki Apiti the Awakening of Creativity: A Pedagogy for Trans-national Art," *International Journal of the Arts in Society*, Volume 4, Issue 2 (2009): 97-112; Robert Jahnke, "He tataitanga ahua toi: The House that Riwai Built, A Continuum of Maori art," (PhD thesis, Massey University, New Zealand, 2006), http://hdl.handle.net/10179/984.

materials, and audiences. Jahnke viewed this shift as part of a natural continuum of cultural adaptation practiced by indigenous artists.

Jahnke traced the origins of Maori trans-customary practice back to the 1960s when it evolved outside of tribal environments. By the 1970s, trans-customary forms were introduced and gradually accepted into the tribal context. Frank Overton Colbert, I argue, embodied many of the aspects of a trans-customary artist, one who referred to and revered pan-indigenous cosmological traditions passed down through oral and visual tribal cultures. What proved to be most unorthodox from an indigenous perspective was the simple fact that Colbert addressed the stories and iconography of multiple Native North American tribes well beyond his own mixed blood Chickasaw culture. It was this same controversial strategy that distinguished Colbert as one of the first Native North American modern artists of the 20th century.

An interesting area for future research would be to compare Colbert's work to his Native peers, some of whom he knew personally, who could also be considered trans-customary artists but stylistically quite different. The Pueblo painters Fred Kabotie (Hopi), Awa Tsireh (San Ildefonso), Velino Shije Herrera (Zia), and others, originated what became institutionalized as the Santa Fe Studio style.[2] Their decorative scenes of daily and ceremonial life were exhibited in New York as "Modernist" in 1920, the same year Colbert arrived there. Closer to Colbert's Oklahoma roots, we must consider Plains tribes like the "Kiowa Six" painters who retained and revised pictographic traditions of hide paintings and

[2] Jessica L. Horton, "A Cloudburst in Venice Fred Kabotie and the U.S. Pavilion of 1932". *American Art.* 29, no. 1: 54-81; Horton and Janet Catherine Berlo, "Pueblo Painting in 1932: Folding Narratives of Native Art into American Art History," 2015, 264-280.

narrative “ledger art” into a colorful flat-style of watercolor painting in the 1920s.[3] These simultaneous stylistic developments came to define “traditional” and therefore “authentic” Native North American painting until the postwar period. Colbert’s modern project, however, was forgotten as an anomalous outlier. Jahnke’s diachronic theories enable a more flexible, inclusive reading of indigenous art that does not dismiss trans-customary or non-customary practice as debased compared to an imaginary authentic historical model.

Jahnke also observed that Maori artists, influenced by sources from outside their culture, were engaged in “trans-cultural interlocution” that resulted in the creation of trans-customary or non-customary forms. He observed a correlation between Maori contemporary artists’ modification of historical forms and the capacity of the work to become trans-national in the Euro-American sense of art and ideas moving beyond national boundaries. In other words, when Maori artists significantly modified traditional forms, on the non-customary end of Jahnke’s spectrum, the absence of visual empathy with Maori forms rendered it problematic for Maori spectators who were unable to identify with the work as relevant to their culture. Inversely, the non-customary practice opened up the work to trans-national legibility to a non-native audience.

Colbert, I argue, embodied the trans-customary paradigm articulated in Jahnke’s precise definition:

> Visual empathy involves modification to the visual substitute relative to historical models. In its most exemplary form, prior models can be perceived through the retention of visual structures or patterns re-contextualised in an a-historical manner. Visual empathy is a product of trans-customary modification resulting from a collusion of tribal form and subject matter with modernist practice. The historical models are

[3] Janet Catherine Berlo, *The Szwedzicki Portfolios: Native American Fine Art and American Visual Culture, 1917-1952*. Cincinnati, Ohio: University of Cincinnati Digital Press, 2008. http://digitalprojects.libraries.uc.edu/szwedzicki/01000000.pdf

> stylized in a minimalist design process that retain anatomical associations with prior figurative form while non-figurative form retains pattern relationships with historical models in spite of the application of non-customary materials, tools and technique.[4]

In chapter two, I showed examples of Colbert's trans-customary "visual empathy" with several Hopi katsina images. He composed his hieratic figures in highly geometricized color schemes that bore affinities with modern art movements of his time such as Precisionism, Synchromism, and Cubo-futurism . Would Colbert's modifications to katsina figures that were part of an ancient iconography of Pueblo cultures still be recognizable to indigenous spectators? Quite possibly, yes, due to Colbert's close reading of Hopi ethnographic source paintings that indexed individual katsinas, attributes of regalia and their ceremonial function in Hopi culture.

Katsinas are understood in their tribal context as three things: benevolent spirit beings mediating human and cosmic realms, masked dancers who perform an extensive ceremonial calendar, and carved, painted dolls made to familiarize children with their strange, otherworldly appearances. In the example of his katsina paintings, Colbert did not merely reproduce a visual correspondence to the original ethnographic drawings commissioned by Fewkes. Following Jahnke's theory, those uncredited works could be considered customary insofar as their purpose was mimetic, and designed to document specific costumed katsinam. Colbert's trans-customary turn retained and streamlined the detailed visual attributes of each katsina into geometric compositions. This is starkly evident in the painting *Macibol* (Figure 4), identifiable by its green cylindrical mask and bow-shaped snake effigy. Colbert re-contextualized *Macibol* over an abstract background of faceted colors emphasizing its timeless spiritual identity in contrast to an earth bound masked dancer.

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[4] Jahnke, "The House that Riwai Built," 26.

Yet the artist maintains "visual empathy" with both ethnographic details and historical figurative proportions of katsina dolls. The empathetic visual cues of katsina masks and garments are likely still recognizable to tribal members familiar with katsina religion, even when removed from their ceremonial function. In this way, trans-customary art constitutes a meaningful expression of indigeneity. It is not surprising then, that Colbert, in painting primarily for a Euro-American audience, wrote and displayed brief narrative texts adjacent to each painting to communicate a tribal context for each image. In this way, we can consider Colbert's work trans-customary, trans-cultural and trans-national as theorized by Jahnke.

However, despite the expressive and culturally specific characteristics of Colbert's katsina paintings, they must still be considered as modern Primitivist appropriations that were part of a gradual shift in katsina imagery from sacred to secular meanings. Colbert's abstracted katsinas share traits with earlier appropriations of katsina imagery by German Expressionist Emil Nolde who frequented ethnographic museums. A decade before, in 1911, he embraced the visual culture of "savagism" as a critique of bourgeois social values in still-life works like *Fetishes (Exotic Figures)* (Figure 14) and *Exotic Figures II* (Figure 15). Numerous Surrealist artists in the 1930s collected katsina dolls and exhibited them as "decontextualized objects" alongside "readymades" like Duchamp's *Bottle Rack.*[5] Art historian J.J. Brody pointed out the ironic contradictions and inversions present in the ideological transformation of katsinas from their tribal function as carved teaching tools encoded with spiritual meanings to aesthetic objects subject to formal rules dictated by a non-native art classification systems that effectively denied their spiritual intent. Colbert

[5] J.J. Brody, "Kachina Images," 158.

embraced the contradiction as "crosscultural social strategy"[6] by hybridizing traditional iconography with modern stylistic adaptations while still attempting to translate tribal stories for a Euro-American audience.

Figure 13: Nolde, *Fetishes (Exotic Figures),* 1911, painting.

Figure 14: Nolde, *Fetishes (Exotic Figures II),* 1911, painting.

The God of Northern Lights, (Figure 16) painted in tempera circa 1921, is another example of Colbert's trans-customary art practice applied to an entirely different indigenous context. Several consistent stylistic elements are evident here: the "God" figure placed on a central axis, this time in the extreme foreground at the bottom edge of the painting, a vertical "root-three rectangle," as described by Hambidge, with a horizon line separating the upper two-thirds of the picture's sky space from the icy landscape below. The totemic figure is flattened and stylized with surface designs resonant with traditional indigenous art of Pacific Northwest North America. In the lower half of the totem abstracted salmon forms float against colored diagonal lines suggesting water. The red and green zigzag form references patterns seen in Coast Salish weaving. A bird form, most likely representing the mythological thunderbird, is visible between the protruding eyes as it is commonly presented in carved totem pole figures.

[6] Ibid.

Figure 16: Colbert, *The God of Northern Lights,*
Circa 1921, tempera.

Colbert rendered the natural phenomena of the aurora borealis, referenced in the title, as upsweeping arcs of unmodulated color in the middle ground. He visually linked the excitation of atmospheric particles to the visible light spectrum through a segmented horizontal rainbow which encloses a body of water behind the totemic figure. Triangular forms in the foreground and on the horizon suggested mountains rising from the frozen tundra. Colbert experienced this landscape firsthand on his epic "100,000 mile journey" of 1915-16 that saw him dogsled across Alaska to the Arctic Circle. [7] Compared to the customary practice of monumental totem poles among Northwest Coast tribes, Colbert's modifications to the historical model was extreme in *The God of Northern Lights*. He foreshortened the silhouette of a totem pole but curtailed its height to emphasize the vastly larger natural environment. The abstracted surface design elements he applied to the totem figure departed significantly from customary carving practice, which usually entails highly modeled animal and human forms contrasting sharply with the flatness of Colbert's figure.

[7] "Indian Artist on Warpath," *The Morning Tulsa Daily World*, March 13, 1921.

By significantly altering the traditional form, the artist elided the tribal functions of carved totem poles indicative of family and clan affiliations or tribal stories. Instead, Colbert portrayed an individual “god” dwelling in a stylized, mythical landscape.

Returning to Jahnke’s framework, Colbert’s selective display of “visual empathy” with Northwest Coast art traditions indicates the artist’s ability to adapt his style from the “trans-customary” toward the “non-customary” paradigm. Following Jahnke’s correlation between non-customary art practice and trans-national legibility, it is notable that this painting was likely the first to be purchased by an institution. Colbert exhibited at the University of Oklahoma School of Art in 1923, after which he sold one painting.[8] Oscar Brousse Jacobson, the long tenured director there, was an important advocate of Native American modernist painting and reportedly took great interest in Colbert. Jacobson supported the artistic development of many of Colbert’s Oklahoma peers, particularly artists from Southern Plains tribes, like the Kiowa Six. In the late 1920s, these artists established a traditional flat style of painting that received international attention just as Colbert’s career plateaued following his return from Paris.

Another compelling example of Colbert’s trans-customary practice can be seen in *Tlaloc*, *God of Waters* (Figure 17) painted in watercolor, circa 1920. Tlaloc is one of the oldest deities found in Mesoamerica with representations in painted codices, stone sculpture, and ceramic vessels dating back centuries prior to European contact. Though closely associated with the ancient city at Teotihuacan, Tlaloc rain god figures appeared in Mayan,

[8] “Art in an Oklahoma City,” *The American Magazine of Art*, November 1923. Though the title of the painting Colbert sold wasn’t indicated in the article, *The God of Northern Lights* was the only Colbert painting in the collection of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma until *Citoto* was donated in 2016.

Aztec and Toltec iconography as well. Colbert was likely exposed to this figure during his travels in Mexico in 1916. He painted Tlaloc as a blocky statuesque figure standing with arms folded on a yellow-gold pedestal. Based on its traditional iconography, Colbert captured the goggle-like eyes and blue-green pigments commonly associated with the rain god. The body of the figure is a mottled green in which Colbert watered down the paint to emphasize its liquid qualities over the petrified monumentality of a statue.

Figure 17: Colbert, *Tlaloc*, *God of Waters,* Circa 1920, watercolor.

At its base, in a circular hole in the ground, is a whirlpool of water. Finger-like rivulets of water extend toward the pool from both sides of the painting on a gradient ground of warm colors. The artist structures the middle ground into symmetrical rectangular blocks reminiscent of Mesoamerican architecture. He extended the symmetry of the work with two pierced, decorated skulls flanking the figure. Each skull is accompanied by a colorful parrot, one standing, one hanging, with two decorative floral spheres mysteriously suspended by red strings from the skulls' mouth. Colbert's "visual empathy" with traditional Tlaloc visual attributes, particularly the large round eyes, figure color, and water association is obvious though stylized. His inclusion of skulls, flowers and birds referenced aspects of indigenous

Mexican culture and biodiversity: sacrificial religious practices, the floating gardens of Xochimilco, and the red-headed Mexican parrot. Though this was the only work Colbert painted of a tribal culture outside of Native North America, *Tlaloc* demonstrates at once his trans-cultural, trans-customary, trans-national art practice. We recognize his "visual empathy" with historical models hybridized by his stylistic interpretation of the figure, expressive use of color, and geometricized design sense.

I turn now to the indigenous epistemology developed by the Anishinaabe author, educator and literary critic, Gerald Vizenor. Over his long and prolific career, Vizenor has introduced several concepts and linguistic innovations to illuminate the Native North American experience. His writings are strongly influenced by indigenous oral traditions, as well as by European poststructuralism. One of his central ideas is the deconstruction of the word "Indian." In his book *Manifest Manners,* he calls the term "a colonial enactment,"[9] rooted in a homogenizing linguistic misnomer, ruthlessly imposed by the literature of a dominant culture. For Vizenor, the term fails to refer to actual tribal cultures or identities, instead functioning as a "bankable simulation," a fictional commodity, and an ironic absence of indigeneity.

Vizenor counters the notion of "Indian" with three interrelated concepts. His phrase "manifest manners" refers to the genocidal operations of settler colonialism embedded in the nationalist project of Manifest Destiny which decimated tribal cultures throughout the nineteenth century. Yet indigenous people of North America, representing hundreds of distinct tribes, have persisted through the act of "survivance," an open-ended neologism implying survival, endurance and resistance. Furthermore, the word suggests an assertion of

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[9] Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1994) 11.

indigenous presence, particularly through the continuance of tribal stories and oral traditions going back thousands of generations before European contact. Survivance has been the antidote for and refusal of colonial dominance, tragedy and "the legacy of victimry."[10] Vizenor ascribes the active practice of survivance to his concept of the "postindian." The following passage links these three ideas together and I suggest that it articulates Frank Overton Colbert's overall strategic approach to producing visual, textual and performative work.

> The postindian warriors hover at last over the ruins of tribal representations and surmount the scriptures of manifest manners with new stories; these warriors counter the surveillance and literature of dominance with their own simulation of survivance. The postindian arises from the earlier inventions of the tribes only to contravene the absence of the real with theatrical performances; the theater of tribal consciousness is the recreation of the real, not the absence of the real in the simulations of dominance.[11]

Colbert's trans-customary, pan-indigenous approach to visualizing spiritual beings accompanied by recreated narratives of tribal folklore is consistent with Vizenor's "postindian" description. In this light, Colbert's oeuvre could be called a "simulation" of indigenous survivance manifested in visual, textual and performative culture, a courageous counteraction to the oppressive, unreal simulations of "manifest manners."

Vizenor's framework helps us explain why Colbert exercised his agency, and expressed his indigenous identity, in sensational, sometimes contradictory ways, beyond his painting and writing practice. Colbert played on popular "Indian" stereotypes of the period to skillfully attract publicity. He enjoyed both educating and disrupting Euro-American perceptions of indigenous people. For example, he was known to attend his exhibition

[10] Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

[11] Vizenor, *Manifest Manners,* 5.

openings and public events in buckskin garments and a feathered headdress, atypical of Chickasaw regalia or the Euro-American dress of his own family upbringing. The popular press capitalized on the images of a modern "Indian" in a headdress while often exaggerating his costumed identity as a "full-blooded Indian chief." [12] An illustrative anecdote, published in two biographies of the writer Mary Austin, told of her attending a banquet given in her honor at the National Arts Club in January 1922. She chose Colbert as her escort whose appearance "brought gasps from the reception committee."

> Her escort for the occasion, a young Chickasaw painter named Overton Colbert, wore a quill-embroidered buckskin topped by a headdress made of black and white flamingo feathers. When one guest asked what teeth were used for his necklace, Colbert replied "alligator." "How horrid!" she said, before adding, "I suppose they are the same to you as my pearls." "Not at all," Colbert replied. "Any fool can take a pearl away from an oyster."[13]

Aside from his sharp wit, one can surmise that Colbert enjoyed being an "arm piece" if it provided him access to New York's literati. Colbert wanted to be *seen* and placed himself in positions where he would also be *heard* as a postindian protagonist in the "theater of tribal consciousness" that Vizenor described. His wide ranging transcultural, transatlantic practice included public lecture performances on native contributions to art and literature, published writing, acting in amateur theatre, collaboration with the multidisciplinary Inje-Inje group, and circulation among the avant-garde circles of New York and Paris.

As his success grew in the Euro-American art world of the early 1920s he began to go by the name "Red Feather," or sometimes "Hishi Homa" in the Chickasaw language. One

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[12] Hortense Saunders, "An Oklahoma Indian Gains Fame on Broadway as Great New York Artist," *The Daily Oklahoman*. Jan. 8, 1922; "F. Overton Colbert," *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), photo/caption in Sunday Rotogravure Section, March 19, 1922.

[13] Augusta Fink, *I-Mary: A Biography of Mary Austin* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983), 203; Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, *Mary Austin and the American West* (University of California Press, 2008), 172-173.

detects the increasing tension in Colbert's personality between his mixed-blood Chickasaw identity and the Euro-American influence of his education and social mobility. In multiple newspaper interviews he expressed resentment of the "white man's ways" and the limitations of "European conventions." He articulated his resistance to "civilization," the strength of native tradition in his heart and a desire to return to living in a "primitive manner."[14] Yet Colbert persisted by taking his "postindian simulation" to Paris in 1923. He was seen dancing before the newsreels and making drawings at the cafes dressed in buckskins. Thus, he earned the moniker "The Redskin of Montparnasse."[15] This colonial invention, equivalent to the misnomer "Indian," exemplified what Vizenor called the "simulation of dominance" or "manifest manners."[16] Almost a century later, we see proof of its ongoing potency when the Paris auction house that sold several of Colbert's paintings in 2018 revived the nickname "The Redskin of Montparnasse" in its advertisements. I suggest that Colbert's larger project was a creative assertion of tribal "survivance" in the face of a dominant white culture. His "postindian simulation" arose from his visual and textual translations of oral literature, heard stories and lived experience of tribal people.

[14] Dorothy Craigie, "Young Indian Artist, After 7 Years in Civilization, to Return to Primitive Life," *New York Evening Telegram*, March 13, 1922.

[15] E. Benezit, "Colbert, François Overton Redfeather," *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, etc.* Paris, 2015, via Oxford Art Online.

[16] Vizenor, *Manifest Manners,* 5.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Art historians Berlo and Phillips wrote of the intercultural entanglements that underscore any consideration of Native North American art and artists in the context of art history. When European modernists copied the formal and expressive qualities of indigenous and "primitive" art at the turn of the 20th century, they had minimal understanding of the objects' original uses or meanings. They sought a break from what they considered outdated academic and cultural paradigms, just as North American artists yearned for national authenticity following a worldwide conflict. While this canonized narrative of modernism is well-known, we should take our cue from Berlo and Phillips and consider how "a number of pioneering indigenous painters and sculptors further complicated this movement by adopting modernist genres and styles to serve their own needs for self-expression and cultural preservation."[1] Frank Overton Colbert was a significant figure in this group, one who used visual art, written texts, and performative actions to communicate an unorthodox pan-indigenous codex of spirit beings and written cosmology.

In chapter two of this study, I identified the primary aesthetic qualities of Colbert's paintings. Though small in scale, his works were distinctive thanks to his sophisticated use of color, frequent geometric compositions, flat figuration and abstracted landscapes. His brief texts, written in English, were displayed with each painting. They typically indicated their tribal source and told poetic stories about the individual spirit beings. In addition to his writing, Colbert's public lectures on Native American art and literature were indicative of his larger transcultural artistic project which was meant to adapt and preserve indigenous

[1] Berlo and Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 12.

cosmology. I suggest his work operated as a visual and textual bridge to a predominantly non-native audience.

Colbert's unusual stylistic hybridity was visible in his painting technique, his approach to subject matter and his use of written texts to interpret the work. He was influenced by the compositional method of dynamic symmetry, developed by artist and educator Jay Hambidge to mathematically analyze how forms from nature were applied to ancient Egyptian and Greek representations. Hambidge's study was published the same year Colbert went to New York and he likely encountered it at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art. In chapter two, I showed how Colbert used the root-four rectangle to spatially divide his canvases, first, by equally dividing a vertically oriented rectangle into four horizontal bands, out of which the lowest one typically established the landscape horizon; then, by dividing the rectangle into four equal vertical columns, and intersecting diagonal lines to the corners of the canvas. He situated his figures on a central vertical axis where the intersecting lines would meet giving shape to the figure itself. Hambidge illustrated how this technique was used to create the flat, hieratic figures in ancient Egyptian art. Colbert's application of this technique to his figures emphasized their status as spirit beings manifest in this world but are not of it.

We saw how Colbert applied this geometric compositional scheme in a subset of katsina paintings, executed circa 1922. In these works, the figures are inscribed into the landscape through diagonal lines infused with faceted areas of color. Another clue to the artist's stylistic hybridity can be seen in his appropriation of Hopi ethnographic images published by the anthropologist Jesse Walter Fewkes at the turn of the century. When viewed side-by-side, Colbert's stylistic adaptations were evident; though he carefully copied the

iconographic gestures and garments of each katsina, he rendered them symmetrically with hard edges and geometricized details. Unlike the ethnographic drawings, lacking backgrounds or perspective, Colbert placed his figures in abstract landscapes, using simple geometric forms like the step pyramid or triangles to represent mountains and mesas. The figure-ground relationship was intentionally ambiguous in these works. While we perceive some depth from the figure standing or floating in the foreground, the intersecting diagonals overwhelm any illusionistic perspective in favor of a unified pictorial space extending to each corner and edge of the canvas. The artist's written texts, designed to aid the viewer in interpreting the painting, are another instance of stylistic hybridity. Colbert translated heard stories from diverse tribal sources into poetic legends. Writing in English, he crossbred oral and traditional forms, to communicate his pan-indigenous vision to the modern Euro-American audience.

In reviewing Colbert's exhibition history and critical reception, particularly his most active period in New York from 1920 to 1923, we get a better sense of how his work was both highly original and difficult to classify. The critics were favorably impressed by the form and content of Colbert's "Indian Folk-lore Paintings." They recognized his skills as a fine draftsman and colorist. One of the critics observed, "As a designer his arrangements often rise to the heights of creative imagination." [2] The art press, however, had little experience or understanding of Native North American artwork, and relied on stereotypical descriptions of Colbert's work as "stories of primitive belief from a native's viewpoint in terms of fanciful and grotesque symbolism."[3] Critics seldom compared his work to art movements of the period, even though he exhibited alongside a wide variety of American

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[2] "Some Current Art Shows in the Local Galleries," *New York Tribune*, December 4, 1921.

[3] Ibid.

artists. Instead, multiple critics attempted to link his work back to traditional indigenous art forms like basketry or needlework. This denotes a critical denial of his art school training and experience as an applied artist in favor of a shallow colonial narrative that placed indigenous culture in a pre-modern past. More often than not, Colbert's critical reception was defined by a contradiction in terms, decidedly "Indian" in character and therefore "primitive," and yet unmistakably modern in execution and materials.

Frequently, the critics framed his Euro-American artistic training in conflict with his inborn talent. Colbert himself repeatedly spoke of his desire to throw off his artistic training to arrive at "the most unsophisticated impulses."[4] This tension between the "civilized" and "savage" aspects of his personality became an ongoing theme with art critics and mainstream journalists. They wrote of his resistance to the forced assimilation he faced as a youth, both from his family and government schools that sought to divide and discourage his Native identity. This experience led Colbert to seek out, when he could, the traditional elders of his tribe to satiate his spiritual hunger. As one critic observed, his resentment of the white man's ways "also deepened his racial loyalty and has marked out in his mind a mission as the pictorial historian of the ancient rites of his tribe."[5] Another journalist echoed a similar racialized viewpoint:

> His paintings, with their background of European training, modern thought and technique, go to the primitive thoughts and impulses of the red people for their inspiration and that in their symbolism they contain meaning and story that the young artist is most earnest in his endeavor to pass on to this modern generation.[6]

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[4] "Indian Artist on Warpath," *The Morning Tulsa Daily World,* March 13, 1921.

[5] Frederick W. Eddy, "Chickasaw Indian Exhibits Paintings in Gotham Gallery," *The Indianapolis Star,* January 1, 1922.

[6] "An Indian Artist With a Native Art." *The Sunday Tulsa Daily World*, October 8, 1922.

Here the theme of Colbert's mixed-race Chickasaw identity comes to the forefront in comprehending his pan-indigenous artistic project. Art critics seized on the performative aspects of Colbert's public persona "Red Feather." They commented on his practice of attending openings and giving tours of his exhibitions dressed in traditional buckskin garments and a feathered headdress. Colbert had a desire to be unequivocally seen as a Chickasaw, "American Indian" artist, with a modern transcultural perspective. He intentionally communicated indigeneity through his art, writing and performance, in part, to remain connected to his Native identity, and equally to transform traditional tribal iconography and stories of spirit beings for a predominantly modern, urban Euro-American audience. In this way, Colbert is a fascinating artist entangling multiple modernisms: European, American, and Native North American.

In the previous chapter, I posited two contemporary indigenous epistemologies in order to place Colbert's artistic project in a different light. Maori artist and educator Robert Jahnke developed a schematic of indigenous art practice based on his analysis of how contemporary Maori artists responded to external changes in traditional iconography. Jahnke identified three kinds of art practice: traditional or customary, trans-customary, and non-customary. The linchpin of his schematic is the concept of an artist's "visual empathy" with historical models whose forms are modified. The experience of "visual empathy" enabled indigenous artists and viewers to identify with their tribal cultural forms. I suggest that a key aspect of Colbert's artistic modernity was his "trans-customary" practice even when the artist was modifying traditional forms, outside his "civilized" Chickasaw culture. I cited examples of how Colbert modified historical indigenous forms of Pueblo katsinas, Northwest Coast

totems, and Aztec stone sculpture in creating his pan-indigenous codex of spirit beings and Native stories.

Anishinaabe literary critic Gerald Vizenor has greatly contributed to creating a new language for the indigenous experience in the modern and contemporary periods. His unusual hybridization of Native North American oral traditions and European poststructuralism led to several interrelated ideas that speak to Colbert's far-reaching project. I suggest that the artist practiced what Vizenor called "survivance," a positive assertion of indigenous presence amidst a dominant hostile colonial culture. Colbert's choice to reject the wishes of his family to pursue art over a commercial or political career was both an act of artistic agency and a defense of his Native identity. Furthermore, his exclusive dedication to pan-indigenous subject matter was a form of resistance, a repudiation of the dominant Euro-American culture constantly projecting "manifest manners," fictional stereotypical simulations of Native people as traumatized victims of a vanishing race. Colbert, instead, took the opportunity to preserve, transform and translate indigenous spirituality for the non-native audience.

It is my view that we can better understand Colbert through what Vizenor theorized as the "postindian warrior," one who counters the scientific surveillance of ethnography and the discourse of colonial dominance with his own "simulation of survivance."[7] In other words, Colbert was assertively showing and telling old stories in a new form to accomplish the continuance of tribal spirituality into the modern 20th century. Vizenor's framework of the "postindian warrior" also makes space for understanding the performative aspects of Colbert's persona, "Red Feather," who playfully attended openings in traditional, if not exactly Chickasaw, garments. He cleverly drew media attention to establish a positive

[7] Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 5.

indigenous presence and publicly lecture on the contributions of Native artists to American culture.

I return to the complex entanglements that shaped Colbert's identity and artistic project. As a mixed-race Chickasaw, one of the "Five Civilized Tribes" whose cultural traditions and iconography were gradually diluted by two centuries of European intermarriage, Colbert struggled to resolve his spiritual devotion to traditional Native lifeways with the materialistic expectations of his aristocratic family to embrace modernity. As an artist, he found a potential solution by making use of his Euro-American education and training to originate a pan-indigenous cosmological codex manifested in visual, written and performative art. If his oeuvre preserved traditional forms by transforming them, it also resulted in his legacy being lost in a liminal space, neither entirely modern nor entirely indigenous, and therefore problematic to classify and historicize. Distanced by a century of intervening art history, we might now consider how Colbert occupied meaningful roles at the vanguard of Native North American and American modernism as a trans-customary indigenous artist.

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Brian L. Hearn is an arts writer, curator and fine art collection manager. As a nontraditional student, his graduate studies in art history at the University of Missouri – Kansas City mark a mid-career pivot. Brian was the founding film curator at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art from 1995 – 2014 where he developed and curated a thriving exhibition program, several gallery exhibitions and a permanent film collection. Shifting to the discipline of art history has been stimulating and deeply informative to his interest in contemporary art and artists. Brian plans to continue writing about art professionally while developing his skills as an art advisor and fine art appraiser.