

Early Native American Women Painters of Oklahoma

America Meredith

Cherokee Nation



Fig. 1: Made by the Native female companion of Phillip Block, *Rawhide container* (parfleche), 1870, probably Cheyenne, buffalo rawhide and earth paint pigment, 12 x 2½ x 20 in. Oklahoma Historical Society, object ID 00162; (M.L. Andrews Collection)

Our arts carry memories. . . . Where do we look when we want to know who we were in the past, to know where we're going? We look to art, to the design tracks of our material world.

—Joy Harjo (Muscogee/Cherokee), 2014¹

Oklahoma is home to the oldest known painted object in North America. The gender of the person who painted this red, iron oxide zigzag on the frontal bone of the Cooper Bison Skull approximately 10,550 years ago is unknown.² What is known is that countless women have painted hides, rock faces, textiles, ceramics, their own bodies, and other surfaces in the ensuing millennia. The tribes originally from the region—a confluence of the Southern Plains in the west and the Southeastern Woodlands in the east—were the Caddo, Kichai, and Wichita, who all spoke Caddoan languages. Women of the Ancestral Wichita, *Hira:-wisiha:s*, painted their bodies with “circles and rays.”³ Beyond that, our knowledge of Native women’s painting in this region is limited to the modern, postmodern, and contemporary eras, an eyeblink in the time that Native peoples have lived here.

In this essay, I discuss some of the known Native women painters of what is now the state of Oklahoma, particularly those active from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, while asking readers to consider the unnamed Native women artists who preceded them. I am confident more of their contemporaries will become known with further research.

After the passage of the 1830 Indian Removal Act, the U.S. federal government forced tribes from New York to California into what was then Indian Territory. These tribes had diverse cultural practices and gender roles. Among Plains and Plateau tribes, women customarily painted geometric abstractions on hide robes and parfleches (fig. 1),⁴ while men typically painted narrative, figurative works. Early Southeastern Woodlands women, however, painted figurative works. The eighteenth-century Irish trader James Adair wrote that Southeastern tribes once had “made very handsome carpets” of wild Indian hemp. After processing

the fibers, “the old women spin it off the distaffs” and weave the “coarse threads” into textiles, then “they paint each side of the carpet with . . . the images of those birds and beasts they are acquainted with; and likewise of themselves acting in their social, and martial stations.”⁵ Among Southeastern tribes, narrative painting fell within women’s domain.

A nineteenth-century Cherokee woman who painted representationally and successfully competed in the mainstream art world was Narcissa Chisholm Owen (Cherokee, 1831–1911). Born in Webbers Falls, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory,⁶ Owen earned a degree in music from Evansville College, in Indiana, and later taught at the Cherokee Female Seminary, the first institution of higher learning for women west of the Mississippi.⁷ Like many prominent nineteenth-century Native women in Indian Territory, Owen was politically active in women’s clubs. Through the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, she fought for women’s suffrage.⁸

Around 1885, Owen began painting in earnest—first watercolor landscapes, then oil portraits.⁹ She entered three paintings in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904 and won a silver medal for a naturalistic group portrait, *Thomas Jefferson and His Descendants* (fig. 2), that today is owned by the University of Virginia. Her larger-than-life self-portrait and portrait of Sequoyah, the blacksmith who invented the Cherokee writing system, are in the collection of the Oklahoma Historical Society, while Tulsa’s Gilcrease Museum owns several portraits she painted of both Native and non-Native acquaintances. “I have found art my greatest resource and general pleasure,” she wrote in her 1907 memoir.¹⁰

While early art historians were aware of Owen, they left her out of the Native art canon, presumably because realistic portraits in oil paints fell outside the narrow definitions of “Indian art” in the twentieth century. Her surviving portraits are idealized, dramatic Tenebrist works, with soft faces emerging from dark clothing and moody backgrounds.

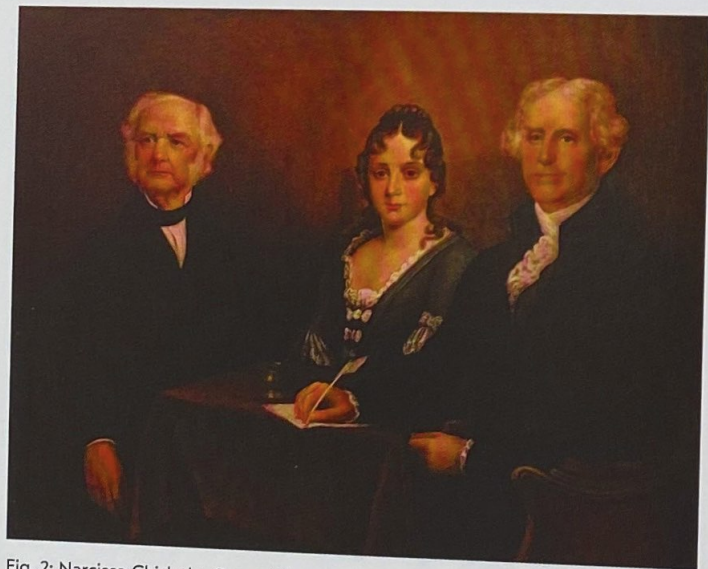


Fig. 2: Narcissa Chisholm Owen (Cherokee, 1831–1911), *Thomas Jefferson and His Descendants*, 1904. University of Virginia, Photo: Adriana Greci Green



Fig. 3: Jack Hokeah and an unidentified friend visiting Sister Mary Olivia Taylor, 1930. Hokeah, a member of the Kiowa Six, received his first art instruction from Sister Olivia, who was his grade school teacher. Collection of Marquette University Raynor Memorial Libraries, Marquette University Archives, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records, ID 10826

Features are smooth, and details such as jewelry, buttons, or eyeglasses hint at the identity and personality of the sitter.

Owen didn’t strive to be a full-time artist. Even today artists teach to make a living, and teaching was one profession historically open to women. Prior to Oklahoma statehood, several Native American schools taught painting, but this is only hinted at by surviving archival materials. The Harrell Institute, a Methodist school in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Indian Territory, had an art department recorded in an 1892 photograph and mentioned in the school’s newspaper, *Our Brother in Red*.¹¹

Seminole art historian Mary Jo Watson discovered a photograph of Lilah Denton Lindsey (Muscogee/Cherokee, 1860–1943), likely from the 1880s, painting *The Merrimac and the Monitor* on an easel in her home.¹² Lindsey, a civic leader in Tulsa, was the first Muscogee woman to earn a college degree; she attended the Synodical Female College in Missouri and graduated from the Hillsboro-Highland Institute in Ohio prior to the boarding school era.¹³ She painted the maritime battle scene on canvas, presumably

with oils.¹⁴ One could dismiss her civic and academic achievements as assimilations into European-American society, or one could step back and recognize them as the results of Indigenous support for women's education, a continuance of Native women's political engagement and pursuit of knowledge in matters of warfare, and evidence of interest in national politics and history in Indian Territory.

Other Native women painters who also became teachers are only known peripherally through their students. This is the case of Sister Mary Olivia Taylor (Choctaw/Chickasaw, 1872–1931) (fig. 3). Born Vernetta “Nettie” Cross Taylor, she attended St. Elizabeth's Academy, a Roman Catholic school for Indian girls in Purcell, Chickasaw Nation. After becoming a nun, Taylor began teaching at St. Patrick's Mission School, also known as the Anadarko Boarding School, where she taught art classes to several of the Kiowa Six, including Lois Smoky Kaulaity.¹⁵

Anadarko, in southwestern Oklahoma, is home to several Southern Plains tribes whose nineteenth-century painting styles were divided by gender: women painted in geometric abstraction, and men painted narrative, figurative works. However, some exceptions emerged. James Auchiah, one of the Kiowa Six, told collector Arthur Silberman that “his grandmother, who remained an inspiration throughout his life, was a noted medicine woman and ‘color mixer.’ Later, from 1918 to 1925, he was one of the Kiowa youths who supplied English captions for a new calendar count started by the daughter of Dohasan (keeper of one of the Kiowa tribal calendars).”¹⁶

This daughter, or perhaps granddaughter, of Dohasan, was Kawlahnohndaumah, or Footprints of a Buffalo, today most commonly referred to as Ananti Odlepaugh.¹⁷ “Ananti,” likely a nickname, means “cross, or ill-tempered” in Kiowa, and she described herself to a missionary as being “mean and cranky.”¹⁸ Born in 1859, Ananti married Odlepaugh, Satanta's son, and had several children. Around 1885 she began contributing to a pictorial calendar by “drawing linearly on a long strip of muslin,” and in “multiple pages in [a] bound volume” as anthropologist Candace Greene writes.¹⁹ Sometimes called the Ananthi Odlepaugh Ledgerbook, it is more commonly called the Ananti Calendar. The calendar may have been originated by another artist, after which Ananti Odlepaugh assumed stewardship of it, contributed drawings,²⁰ and kept adding to the calendar until her death in 1934.²¹ She is buried in Saddle Mountain Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Intertribal Cemetery in Kiowa County, Oklahoma.

Calendars among nineteenth-century Plains tribes were pictorial records painted on hides. As American mercenaries wantonly slaughtered bison in the 1860s and 1870s, Plains artists adopted increasingly available Western art materials. Kiowa calendars, called *sai-guat*, or “winter marks,” contained a pictorial image for each winter and summer of a year.²² Being a calendar keeper was a respected position, and

calendar keepers had to remember the events represented by the semiannual pictorial symbol. In the nineteenth century, a woman calendar keeper was extraordinary.

The Ananti Calendar is in the collection of the Fort Sill National Historic Landmark and Museum and spans two strips of cloth and two bound volumes.²³ These contain images representing the marvelous to the mundane. For instance, the 1921–22 entry was marked by a fatal car crash.²⁴ Following an established iconography, Ananti drew forked Sun Dance poles to represent summers and an hourglass-shaped glyph to represent winters. Her most elaborate artwork appears in her winter entry for 1869–79, which featured the winter glyph and “two teepees, a camp kettle and a large number of men on horseback, some being Indians and others to represent soldiers.”²⁵ Besides James Auchiah and others, Ananti's nephew Aitsan wrote English notes to interpret her imagery.²⁶ Just as Ananti may have taken over the calendar from another artist, someone else likely continued it after her death, since the dates it records spans 1851 through 1945.

While Ananti Odlepaugh recorded her calendar, two other early twentieth-century Southern Plains women explored figurative painting. Susan Peters, field matron for the Kiowas, noticed the artistic talent of young Kiowa students, including students of Sister Mary Olivia Taylor. Peters reached out to Oscar B. Jacobson, head of the

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Fig. 4: Lois Smoky Kaulaity (Kiowa, 1907–1981), *Lullaby*, c. mid-20th century, tempera on paper, 9¼ x 5½ in. GM 02.509, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK

University of Oklahoma's art department, and requested that an art program for credit be offered at OU. Lois Smoky Kaulaity, whose Kiowa name Bougetah means "Coming of the Dawn,"²⁷ joined four Kiowa men at OU in Norman in 1927. Art professor Edith Mahier provided them with guidance and studio space but deliberately did not teach them Western art techniques. Instead they painted from their memory, and Oklahoma-style "traditional" painting or Southern Plains "flatstyle" painting was born. This stripped-down painting style of figures on an unpainted ground dominated American Indian painting for the first half of the twentieth century.

The mid- to late nineteenth century saw the transition of pictorial, narrative Plains art on hide, paper, and cloth become what is widely known as "ledger art," so named for the discarded ledger books traders gave to Native men to draw and paint in. The Kiowa Six used better-quality paints, papers, and illustration boards and transformed this style into an easel art, which Oscar Jacobson skillfully promoted in elite American and European art circles. Smoky Kaulaity left the program in less than a year, but her art was also exhibited and included in *Kiowa Art*, the 1929 portfolio of pochoir printing (a hand-colored stencil technique).

"The painting of pictures was traditionally a masculine art among the Plains Indians," Jacobson and his wife, Jeanne d'Ucel, wrote. "While the first five Kiowas were in the university, there was noticeably, among the men, a certain resentment towards Lois for participating in such an unladylike activity. Their resentment found expression in several, small, unkind annoyances to her, even to the extent of mutilating her work."²⁸

Ironically, due to their rarity, Smoky Kaulaity's paintings are the most collectible of all the Kiowa Six's artwork. She typically painted domestic scenes of women and children, dominated by yellows for buckskin dresses and whites in feathers and beadwork (fig. 4). Her attention to detail in beadwork in her paintings foretold her ultimate career as an influential beadwork artist, whose design innovations are still used by Kiowa beadwork artists today.

Almost a decade younger than Smoky Kaulaity, Marian Terasaz Kassanavoid (Comanche, 1915–2009), whose Comanche name was Aukemah, attended the new Native art program at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma, which, along with OU, was one of the most influential Oklahoma schools for Native art during the twentieth century. Bacone College was a Baptist junior college founded in 1880 in partnership with the Muskogee (Creek) Nation for Indian students. In 1935, Bacone opened its art program, spearheaded by Acee Blue Eagle (Muscogee/Pawnee/Wichita, 1907–1959), who earned his BFA degree at the University of Oklahoma and studied under Oscar Jacobson. Kassanavoid entered the program in its first year and continued through 1938. Jacobson wrote that "she is talented and painted some splendid watercolors of Indian women and children" at Bacone (fig. 5). He included both Kassanavoid's and Smoky Kaulaity's paintings in his 1950 book, *American Indian Painters*—they were the only non-southwestern women artists to be included—and wrote, "Marian's work possesses a delicacy, grace, and charm that could be described by no other term but feminine."²⁹ Kassanavoid ultimately became a textile artist and entered her ribbon work in the American Indian Exposition, held annually in Anadarko.³⁰



Fig. 5: Marian Terasaz Kassanavoid (Comanche, 1915–2009), *Women Drying Hide*, 1938, tempera on paper, 13 × 18½ in. GM 02.182, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK

Smoky Kaulaity and Kassanavoid both enjoyed long careers as visual artists, but only briefly were they figurative painters. One can't help but imagine if they had had more widespread support from their own communities and the outside world, they may have continued painting. However, historians are diligently recuperating their histories, so their contributions to early Oklahoma flatstyle painting can be acknowledged.

Poet and musician Joy Harjo (Muscogee/Cherokee) has made a point to keep alive the memories of her grandmother and great-aunt, both of whom were painters. Harjo never met her grandmother Naomi Harjo Foster (Muscogee, 1896–c. 1930s), who died of tuberculosis shortly after giving birth to Joy's father, but her great-aunt Lois Harjo Ball (Muscogee, 1906–1982) became her greatest cultural influence (see Heid E. Erdrich, "Literary Arts: Native American Women Writers," p. 215).

"Both Lois and my grandmother were painters. I have paintings by both of them in my home," Joy Harjo shared in an interview. "The one by my grandmother is a three-quarters life-size of Osceola, who is still admired by us. . . . Most people don't know that his mother was Creek. She painted it in 1916. . . . So, to paint Osceola in this time was to make a major statement," Harjo said.³¹

The sisters were born in Okmulgee, capital of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, to Henry Marsey Harjo and Katie Monahwee Harjo. Following Muscogee matrilineal inheritance, they belonged to Katcv, or Tiger clan, as did their mother.³² Ball earned an associate of arts degree at Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri,³³ and both sisters earned bachelor's degrees in art from Oklahoma City University.

Ball was a visiting artist at Southern Methodist University in 1935. A newspaper clipping reveals a confident woman balancing a palette while painting on a canvas, presumably in oil. The caption describes her as "Miss Harjo, Indian portrait and landscape artist and Princess of the Creek Nation."³⁴ She later managed the collection of the Creek Council House Museum in Okmulgee, which today includes her paintings, basketry, and pottery.³⁵

When Joy Harjo's parents divorced, her father took all his mother's and aunt's artworks with him, "except for a charcoal of two horses running in a storm."³⁶ Harjo dedicated her 2008 book, *She Had Some Horses*, to Lois Harjo Ball.

While these two Muscogee women painters are not widely known, they inspired one of the leading Native American poets of our time. Harjo, in turn, created the Naomi (Harjo) Foster / Lois (Harjo) Ball Scholarship for Muscogee Creek students studying the arts to help Muscogee Creek artistic expression thrive in upcoming generations.

The details I have shared about these early American Indian women painters from Oklahoma are sketchy and provisional. Nonetheless, it is important for both historians of feminist art and Native American art to acknowledge that these women lived and painted; their influences, not

yet fully explored, are still playing out in today's art world. To accurately expand Native art history, we must examine and reject prejudices of early anthropologists and art historians—that women's geometric abstract painting did not merit the same attention that figurate, narrative painting merits; that women who adopted Western tools or techniques to serve their own purposes were somehow less Indian, that moving from painting to beadwork or textile arts signified the end of an art career, or that inadequate coverage in the literature corresponds to a lack of action or influence in life. What can be gleaned from their collective histories is that their Native families valued women's education, women's arts, and women's voices. Instead of demanding that historical Indigenous women artists conform to our expectations of indigeneity, we need to adapt our art histories to reflect the lived realities of the artists.

Hearts Our Pe

NATIVE WOMEN
ARTISTS



JILL AHI