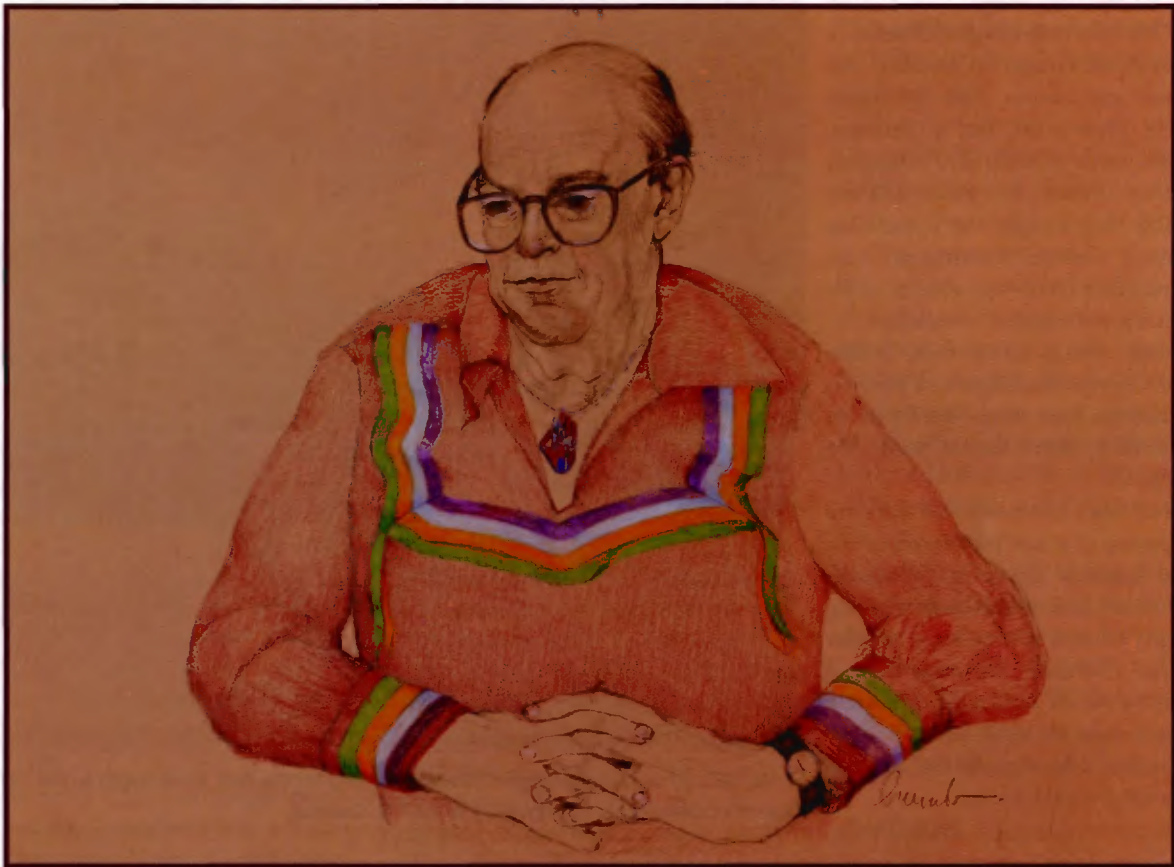


RENNARD STRICKLAND:

*Doctor, Lawyer, Indian, Chief Art Collector
and Storyteller*

BY CONNIE CRONLEY



A thoughtful Rennard Strickland is captured in this pastel on paper by Creek/Potawatomi artist Minisa Crumbo Halsey.

In the nearly 40 years that I have known Rennard Strickland, I have seen many sides of this multi-faceted talent. But the one I enjoy most is that of storyteller.

Rennard is both Osage and Cherokee. I am a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. These heritages are important to the following story.

Once upon a time, I persuaded Rennard to take me to an Osage naming ceremony near Pawhuska. This ceremonial dance is more private than a public powwow.

The dance was to start at 2 p.m. We agreed that we would leave my house in Tulsa at 12:30, giving ourselves plenty of time for the drive of little more than one hour. He arrived about 1 p.m. I was not yet ready to go. Then we had to stop for gas. After that, I wanted to go buy film.

I, being the industrious Cherokee, drove. Rennard, the imperial Osage, rode in the passenger seat. We arrived about 2:30, just as the arena director announced that the two o'clock dance would begin about 4, and the start time of the 8 p.m. dance would be announced later.

That was fine with us. We went out to eat and returned just as the Osage father was helping the honored, young son into his regalia. "Suck in your stomach," the father said. "You look like a Ponca."

continued

This story may not be funny to everybody, but to Indians, it is hilarious.

A full moon shone as we drove home over the Oklahoma prairie. “Rennard,” I said, “tell me again about the time the full-blood Cherokee woman put a curse on you.” He told it in wonderful detail—how he and Jack Gregory (Cherokee), his close friend and mentor, were the targets of a curse. How a cat, and a Cherokee cat at that, came at night and screamed. Rennard was unfazed, but Jack could not sleep. How they sought out a medicine man named George Washington, who prescribed a cure involving tobacco, unfiltered Camels to be exact. It worked.

Rennard, whose blood runs Indian red, kept George Washington as his personal medicine man, even listed him in the acknowledgements for his book, *Fire and the Spirits*.

Another time, I accompanied Rennard to the opening of a new production of the Cherokee historical drama at Tahlequah’s outdoor theater. As renowned as he is among the Osage, Rennard is even more popular among the Cherokee. We were stopped frequently by people who wanted to speak to him and shake his hand. Unknown and docile, I walked a few steps behind him carrying, for some reason, his hat.



This 1977 lithograph *Anadarko Princess Waiting for the Bus* adds depth to the OU art museum’s collection of 20th-century artist T.C. Cannon.

“I don’t like most Indian art, I don’t like most art—period... The art I like must have an edge to it.”

We were among the last to leave the theater, and before we reached the parking lot, the flood lights had been turned out. Mosquitoes buzzing, we wandered among the trees in the dark searching for our car. Finally, Rennard turned to me, “Face it. The tracking gene has been bred out of us.”

The Art Collection. I first saw part of his collection of Indian art in Tulsa as he was assembling it. He was dean of the University of Tulsa’s law school and

living in a condo near the historic Creek Council Oak. Every inch of every room was covered with art—walls, halls, doors, even closets, were hung with paintings and rugs. Baskets and pots lined every flat surface. Kachinas seemed to dance from shelves and cabinets.

In 2009 he gave the majority of that remarkable collection, some 350 pieces assembled over 60 years, to the University of Oklahoma’s Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. An appraiser is still at work, but the final value, Rennard says, will be approxi-

mately \$1 million. The public got its first look at the June 3 opening celebration, “Spirit Red: Visions of Native American Artists from the Rennard Strickland Collection.”

“The collection represents the depth and diversity within the Indian art movement,” Rennard explains. It is a personal collection. “It represents my taste in Native American paintings, pottery, beadwork, basketry, textiles and other art forms.”

The scope of the collection is breath-



Strickland autographs a catalogue for Linda Pierson of Pierson Gallery, Tulsa, during the opening reception for "Spirit Red," at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art this past summer. He donated his personal collection of Native American art to the museum in 2009.

taking. As a gift from an Oklahoman to an Oklahoma institution, we might expect a focus on southwestern Indians, but this is not the case. "It reflects the full depth and diversity of the contemporary Native American fine art movement," Rennard says.

We can see a Cheyenne ledger drawing, a Cherokee mural painting, a Zuni-painted deer hide, Navajo Germantown textiles.

Some cultures may be familiar to Oklahomans—Chickasaw, Choctaw, Comanche, Creek, Kiowa, Seminole—others less so: Acoma, Apache, Arapaho, Chippewa, Chiricahua Apache, Cochiti, Cree, Delaware, Diné, Hopi, Jemez, Luiseño, Maricopa, Nez Perce, Pawnee, Pima Zuni, Potawatomi, San Ildefonso, Santa Clara, Shawnee/Peoria, Maidu, Mohawk, Salish, Shoshoni, Tohono O'odham, Yurok, Zia and more.

We can see paintings that are traditional, Impressionistic and abstract cubist.

We can even see examples from his collection of movie posters with Native American themes, which led to his book *Tonto's Revenge*.

The Collector. Rennard bought his first piece in the late 1940s as a boy of eight or nine in his hometown of Muskogee. The watercolor, titled "Warrior with Shield," was by the legendary Acee Blue Eagle. It was priced at \$12.50. Summoning courage, he asked the artist if he could come down on the price. He did. Rennard bought the watercolor for \$10, with an advance from his father, paying it out with his 25 cents-a-week allowance.

"I have been haggling about price and paying it out ever since," he laughs.

In his foreword to the Spirit Red catalogue, OU President David Boren found Rennard himself revealed in the art he acquired: "You will enjoy a glimpse into the mind of the collector and learn how his intelligence and artistic vision shaped his collection."

"I don't like most Indian art," Rennard says. "I don't like most art—period. I don't buy the Indian paintings they do for gas money. I buy the paintings they have really worked on. The art I like must have an edge to it."

One of his favorite pieces is T. C. Cannon's "Collector #5 or Man in Wicker

Chair," in part because of the humor.

When OU art professor Jackson Rushing, holder of the Mary Lou Milner Chair in Native American Art, commented that the painting depicted an Osage chief sitting beneath a copy of Van Gogh's "Wheat Field," Rennard corrected him.

"Oh, no, no, no," Rennard said. "That *is* a Van Gogh."

That artistic allusion to the oil-rich Osages of the 1920s, who bought Rolls-Royces and grand pianos like trinkets, is another example of subtle Indian humor.

That syntax repetition—"no, no, no, no" or "yes, yes, yes"—along with his chuckle, are trademarks of Rennard's speaking pattern. I don't know if he learned it as the high school national extemporaneous speaking champion that he was or as a university professor of law, but it is characteristic of him—charming while emphatic, only slightly disguising his razor intellect.

Although eloquent in English, he is the first to admit that he has no talent for language. For an entire year he drove weekly from Fayetteville, Arkansas, to Tahlequah to study Cherokee. With lamentable results. "All I learned to say is 'sa-sa,' which means 'goose.'"

Author. Rennard recently finished writing his 42nd book, a study of Cherokee art and culture co-written with Chad "Cornassel" Smith, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation.

"What is your writing routine?" I asked him. After a lengthy pause, he replied, "I don't know."

"What do you do for relaxation?"

"Writing and collecting art are my relaxation. I have not worked at anything. Ever."

His current book is the biographies, woven together into story, of "50 or so" Indian individuals. The inspiration was Emerson's essay, "History," which says, "There is no history—only biography."

This prolific author doesn't Twitter or Facebook or even own a cell phone—"Oh, goodness, no! I barely do e-mail."

Nor does he write on a computer.

"I bragged that all my books have been written in longhand on yellow pads until my secretary corrected me. 'No,' she said, 'the first draft was done in longhand. After that, I have retyped as many as 20 or 30 drafts of a chapter.'"

Indian Law Expert. Love the state's Indian casinos? Hate them? Then you can praise—or blame—Rennard, an authority on Native American law. He was the Creek Nation's expert witness in the case that opened Oklahoma's gambling floodgates, the telling *Oklahoma Tax Commission v. Indian Gaming* in 1987.

This is how he tells the story: "The Supreme Court had decided in the *Cabazon* (Band of Mission Indians) case that spring that California could not outlaw Indian gaming. As I said to the court, 'The Indians were gaming when Columbus came to this country, and it predates the relationship of the United States with the tribe.' The Supreme Court

held it was so; and the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the application of the case to Oklahoma's tribes as well.

"I also said it was time the tribes had their own 'go-to-hell money.' Prior to that, the federal government had to approve any attorneys the tribes hired. That meant the B.I.A. [Bureau of Indian Affairs] was approving those who were going to sue it."

In the 1990s, Rennard was selected by the tribe to chair the Osage Constitution Commission ordered by the Federal District judge. The hearings were held in Pawhuska. He gave me this account: After about a week, he said to Elected Vice Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear, "Hasn't everything been said?"

"Yes," Standing Bear replied, "but not everyone has said it." So the hearings continued.



Joseph Erb (U.S., Cherokee)
Gourd with Warriors Addressing Modern Technology, n.d.
Gourd with pigment, 9 1/4 x 12 1/2 in.
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art

Law Professor. "I always wanted to be a lawyer," Rennard says, "but I hated the way law school was taught. And I hated most of my law professors."

The way he saw law school was as "a bunch of old white boys building their egos by intimidating and humiliating a group of young white boys who would grow up to continue this law school academic abuse."

He began writing, he says, because he hated law school so much. He wrote his first book, *Sam Houston with the Cherokees*, between his second and third years at the University of Virginia.

"At the end of my senior year, my absolutely favorite professor told me, 'What you need to do is to go into legal education, and you can change the way it is taught.'"

Legal education has changed since then, he says. When he began teaching law, "women and minorities were told to write about 'mainstream law,' not about minorities or women or even social and cultural issues. That non-traditional scholarship, we were told, was for 'after tenure.' I decided I didn't care to have my academic menu selected by others."

He has had a nomadic career, teaching or serving as dean at nearly 20 universities. But he has always come back to Oklahoma.



Contemporary Native American art is well represented in the Strickland Collection, including this photo collage, *Oklahoma—The Unedited Version* by Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie.



The collage, *Chanters at Dusk*, is one of four works, each in a different medium, by Hopi artist Dan Namingha from the Strickland Collection.

ABOUT RENNARD STRICKLAND

Dr. Rennard Strickland is Senior Scholar in Residence at the University of Oklahoma College of Law as well as the Philip H. Knight Distinguished Professor of Law Emeritus at the University of Oregon School of Law. He founded the American Indian Law and Policy Center at the University of Oklahoma.

Strickland is renowned as a law professor, author, art collector, legal historian and authority on Native American law. He received his B.A. from Northeastern State College, his J.D. from the University of Virginia, his M.A. from the University of Arkansas and his S.J.D. from the University of Virginia.

He has donated the Rennard Strickland Collection of Native American Art, works he had collected for more than half a century, to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at OU.

Strickland chose the Fred, he says, because “out of all of the university art museums in the country, OU has arguably the most outstanding collection of Native American and Western art.” It also has “a unique and rich history dating back to Oscar Jacobson, the Kiowa [Five] and the early MFAs, including Oscar Howe and Dick West.”

“I have had a lot of law students in my life, and most have done very well, including a tremendous number of successful Indian students. I always give my law classes this guarantee: ‘Any time you need advice, give me a call. I’m not being altruistic. I want to know what is happening in Indian law, and you are going to be on the cutting edge.’”

“In Cherokee mythology, the figure of the Raven Mocker can be in many places at the same time. My students have made me into the Raven Mocker. Through them, I am in many places.”

Through the Rennard Strickland Collection, we, too, can be in many places. In our swiftly changing society, he says, the value of the grandfather adviser is minimized. “I suggest we look to the American Indian as a grandfather figure—the storyteller, the teacher. Using the Indian as teacher would help us through the uncertainty of change.”

The 350 pieces in his collection offer us 350 windows into Native American culture, and 350 opportunities to find a wise storyteller and teacher for our time.

Editor’s Note: The catalogue designed by Eric Anderson for the opening of Spirit Red: Visions of Native American Artists from the Rennard Strickland Collection, was named 2009 Best Catalogue of the Year by the Oklahoma Museum Association.

Connie Cronley is a freelance writer living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She was the collaborator with Edward J. Perkins on Mr. Ambassador: Warrior for Peace (2006, University of Oklahoma Press) and has published two books of essays, Light and Variable: A Year of Celebrations, Holiday, Recipes and Emily Dickinson (2006, University of Oklahoma Press) and Sometimes a Wheel Falls Off (2000, HAWK Publishing Group).