

# Native American Returns

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN



Robert Taylor

Throughout the past 40 years, Mary Jo Watson retained a fierce determination to establish a comprehensive program in Native American art and art history at the University of Oklahoma. This October, she will be recognized for her many contributions when she is inducted into the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame.



# merican Art to Its Roots

*A seed planted by Oscar Jacobson  
has grown into a comprehensive program  
for the study of Native American art and art history.*



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ith her willow build and soft voice that calls nearly everyone “honey,” Mary Jo Watson may not look it, but she is every inch a warrior. A kindred spirit to the Wonder Woman action figure on her desk, she has overcome her share of challenges, most recently open-heart surgery, but perhaps her greatest accomplishment is a quest that began 40 years ago at the University of Oklahoma.

“I wanted to teach Native American art history,” says Watson, a member of the Seminole tribe and director emeritus and professor in the School of Art and Art History. *continued*





**T**oday OU leads the nation in the academic study of Native American art and art history, with a Ph.D. program in Native and Western art led by Jackson Rushing III, the Adkins Presidential Professor of Art History and Mary Lou Milner Carver Chair in Native American Art, and an adjoining art museum boasting one of the finest university collections of Native art in the world. Yet the idea seemed radical to academics in the early 1970s. Some suggested the anthropology department might be a better fit than the College of Fine Arts.

“There was nothing on Native American art in OU’s art history program,” she says. “I thought it would be fabulous.”

Watson was not the first to think so. In the 1920s, a group of Kiowa artists came to the attention of OU art professor Oscar Jacobson, who was greatly impressed with the organic power of their work. The Kiowa Five—known more accurately as the Kiowa Six, with the inclusion of the group’s only female, Lois Smokey—enrolled at OU with Jacobson’s encouragement. After a successful 1927 exhibition in Denver, the work of the Kiowa artists was celebrated in Prague, London, New York and Paris, exposing many patrons to Native American art for the first time. Despite this early validation, there was only one course in Native art history by the time Jacobson retired in 1945.

As a child, Watson was not exposed to painted landscapes; she had the real thing to explore.



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With production peaking at 150 to 200 million barrels annually, oil camps circled Seminole, Oklahoma, like a promise ring to prosperity. Companies built shotgun houses near the refineries for their workers, and some couples, like Doyal and Opal Watson, raised families there. Their only daughter inherited a love of nature from both her parents and the black hair and dark eyes of her Seminole father.

On weekends, after stuffing a bag with a can of pork and beans, several sheets of brown paper and a few pencils, Mary Jo could step out her back door into the country, her fox terrier running ahead to clear snakes from the path.

“I had my favorite places. One was a giant rock, where every spring a wild violet managed to grow. I thought that was the most exquisite thing in the world, and I would look for it every year,” she says. “Then I

found a grotto. It was my secret place, where I would sit and draw for hours.”

In fifth grade, she won a prize for her drawing, but her real dream was to become an opera star. In high school musicals, she was always the standout, and she studied for a time with Florence Gillam Birdwell.

Marriage and children temporarily pre-empted higher education. By the time she was 23, Watson had three children, Timothy Doyal, Malia Katherine and Thomas Ken Wantland, who she proudly states are her “most important accomplishments.”

On family trips to the grocery store, she would buy 25-cent books on art and philosophy. She decided education was the key to a better life. She enrolled in psychology at OU “so I could save the world,” she says. There was just one problem: “I didn’t like psychology.”

One day on campus, she walked over to the art school and presented herself to Professor Eugene Bavinger. The formidable Bavinger was initially skeptical of the housewife who wanted to

**This pot-bellied pooch from Colima, Mexico, is actually a burial water vessel, circa 200-300 A.D., one of many artifacts at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art Watson uses to teach students about pre-Columbian civilizations.**

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma; Gift of Sarah Iselin in memory of Lewis and Sally Iselin, 1999



Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman;  
The James T. Blalock Native American Art Collection, 2010



During art history classes, Watson encouraged student America Meredith to find her Native voice. Today, Meredith, an artist, printmaker and curator living in Santa Fe, is editor and publisher of *First American Art Magazine*, a publication dedicated to covering the art of indigenous peoples of the Americas. Above, Meredith's painting, *Adisgalodi (To Hide)*.

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; Gift of Renard Strickland, 2008



In Watson's class, students will learn not only about the fine lines and geometric patterns of Acoma ceramics like this pot by Mary Z. Chino, but also the culture of the Acoma people.

dabble in art, but nevertheless, she was accepted into the program.

"I started painting for real then," she says. "Bavinger taught me about color. He had a rule that students could only paint on a 5-foot by 6-foot canvas. We learned about color in a big way."

She received glowing reviews at her senior show—including from Bavinger—and wanted to continue with her MFA. When she discovered that her thesis topic, art forms of the Seminole Indians, did not fit the curriculum, she enrolled in a graduate program in the College of Liberal Studies. There she met the renowned historian Arrell Morgan Gibson, who became both mentor and friend.

Gibson had written extensively on the American Indian and had been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1971 for his book, *The Chickasaws*. He heartily approved of Watson's desire to teach Native American art and went with her to pitch the idea to interim provost J.R. Morris.

Watson was hired as an adjunct in the Indian Studies program in the College of Arts and Sciences. "I had to call my class 'Indian Aesthetics,'" she recalls. "I couldn't call it art history because I wasn't teaching in the School of Art." *continued*





Whatever it was called, it caught on. Her students began spreading the word, telling friends and chalking the sidewalks of Van Fleet and Parrington Ovals. By the next semester, class size doubled.

“Eventually, I had 60 students,” Watson says. “They nearly overran me, but I got a handle on it.”

Since books on Indian art were rare, Watson found anthropology books with pictures of Indian cradles and houses, and taught “art” and “history” in equal measure. She borrowed a camera and a light table and taught herself to make slides, often finishing them just in time for the next class. Eventually she would put together more than 10,000 slides and own so many books, she had to develop her own card catalog to keep track of them.

**D**uring the 1980s, Watson taught nights at OU and worked days in Oklahoma City, including as director for the Center of the American Indian, which merged with Red Earth. She moved out of state, came back, was let go as an adjunct during the mid-1980s recession and rehired, again part-time.

“I had about given up on Indian art,” she says. “I thought I had better think of something else to do. My husband wanted me to go to law school, which appealed to me about as much as a snake in a bucket.”

In 1993, she had just finished her doctorate in interdisciplinary programs, when she was offered a full-time faculty position in the School of Art. She dived in, developing a curriculum of eight courses—teaching them all herself in rotation. Every Indian art book, every catalog from any Indian art exhibition anywhere in the states provided fuel for lectures.

“I expanded every time I could—usually into areas that I knew nothing about,” she says, chuckling. “Everything I taught,

I taught to myself first.” Native art in all shapes and forms—Plains, pre-Columbian, Eastern Mound Culture, pre-history of Canada and the Northern United States—found its way into her class.

“I don’t just teach art, I teach about Indian people,” she says. “Who they are, where they’re from, their history and their art. I have always respected their genius. Whichever piece of land they were on, it became their place, and it gave them the things they needed.”

There is a reason, says Watson, that Northwest Coast people are the great sculptors of the U.S. They have an entire coast full of trees. There’s a reason that women in the middle of the great American desert did clay—they were surrounded by mountains of it. In her class, the elaborate murals of Bonampak, a 700 A.D. Mayan town, are as worthy of respect as the Sistine Chapel.

“Mary Jo is sneaky,” says former student Heather Ahtone. “She is not boastful or showy with her knowledge, which is encyclopedic. She leads the class in a manner in which students feel that they are bringing *her* to conclusions. As an instructor, I find



In Watson’s classes, baskets tell stories, relay culture and identify a tribe’s place in the world. At right, *Coiled Olla Basket with Katsinas* by Joyce Ann Saufkie, U.S. Hopi.

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; The James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection, 2010





Heather Ahtone, the James T. Bialac Assistant Curator of Native American & Non-Western Art, discusses *Peyote Painting* by Kiowa artist Sherman Chaddlesone, a work from the Fleischaker Collection, which helped revitalize interest in Native American art at the University.

her to be a great mentor. Now I try to leave the door open for students to find their own way.”

**W**atson also has been a role model in other ways. Ahtone, the James T. Bialac assistant curator of Native American and Non-Western Art at OU’s Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, is one of only two Native American curators in the country working with Native collections that are not part of a federal or tribal museum.

“Mary Jo affirmed that one could be a Native Art historian and a Native curator, and be Native first,” says Ahtone. “It’s a significant thing to be able to use one’s culture as a lens through which to make decisions for an institu-

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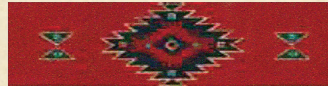
tion. It is because of Mary Jo I am able to do that.”

Under the leadership of OU President David Boren, the Fred Jones has become a regional center for Native American art. The acquisition of the Fleischaker Collection in 1996 was the catalyst for later gifts of Native and Western art from private collectors, most notably, The William H. and Roxanne Thams Collection and The R.E. Mansfield Collection in 2003, The Priscilla C. and Joseph N. Tate Collection in 2004, The Eugene B. Adkins Collection in 2007, The Rennard Strickland Collection in

2009 and The James T. Bialac Collection in 2010.

“I often take my students into the Fred Jones,” says Watson, who is also curator of Native American art at the museum. “For





When Watson began teaching Native American art history, there were few resources to be found and even fewer resources with which to purchase them. Today, her library is overflowing with books on Native art forms from Mexico to British Columbia.



Robert Taylor

**“I consider Mary Jo the second Oscar Jacobson. He put Native American art on the radar, but what she has done since has been remarkable.”**

instance, when I teach pre-Columbian art, we go to the museum where we can see all the Meso-American pieces, and they can see what we’ve been talking about.”

When asked if she felt as if the collection had grown in her favor, she responds, “The collection has grown in the University’s and the state’s favor. My dream was that if people wanted to study American Indian art, they would come to the University of Oklahoma because of our collections. It was a kernel; now it’s growing.”

Amber Sharples, a native of Tulsa and executive director of the Oklahoma State Arts Council, says she moved to the East Coast to attend graduate school, but changed her mind after a visit with Watson.

“I had been accepted at other schools, but when I saw the curriculum that Mary Jo had established and the courses—especially the ones with Native American women artists and 20th century artists—I knew I had to come back.

“I consider Mary Jo the second Oscar Jacobson,” says Sharples. “He put Native American art on the radar, but what she has done since has been remarkable.”

**A**nother of her former students, America Meredith, is both artist and magazine publisher. “I took two Native American art history classes from Mary Jo, and she stressed how important it was that we have Native American art writers. I’ve curated numerous art shows

over the years, and when they weren’t written about, it was almost as if they never happened. So I started a blog about Native American art history that has morphed into *First American Art Magazine*. Mary Jo has been a strong supporter of the magazine since its inception, and I hope to publish some of her writing in it someday.”

The women say Watson has been a role model for them in their own careers.

“She had to defend the value of studying Native American Art at a time when it wasn’t really a field. And to build a program from scratch at a state university as an adjunct, and then become a professor and then director, curator and associate dean, is really an amazing story. This small delicate person has been a force,” says Ahtone.

Like the exquisite violet of her childhood that grew year after year through rock, the program has blossomed and flourished. This fall Watson will teach pre-Columbian art and Latin American art, which has been growing in popularity.

“Our strengths are our collections, but we also have tribal cultural museums throughout the state. We have the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History right here at OU, the Gilcrease and the Philbrook in Tulsa—combined with our Western History Collections and the Oklahoma History Center—that make this a dynamite place to study Indians,” concludes Watson.

*Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.*