



Kevin Red Star | Decoding Tradition

By: **Rosemary Carstens** | August 1, 2009

Known as “Running Rabbit” in his native Crow language, Kevin Red Star is a tall, soft-spoken man who has devoted his life to sharing his culture with the world. Born in the small town of Lodge Grass on eastern Montana’s Crow Reservation, the 65-year-old artist grew up surrounded by vast natural beauty: soaring mountain peaks, sweeping plateaus, deep canyons, sparkling streams, hundreds of alpine lakes to the west, and the mighty Bighorn River to the east. The third of nine children, Red Star has evolved from a self-taught youngster who constantly sketched scenes of his homeland to a pivotal North American master painter and printmaker renowned for his bold palette, emotionally evocative subjects, and compelling design elements.

Red Star’s paintings are a sophisticated synthesis of traditional and contemporary imagery that expresses his deep ties to, and appreciation for, his people, their culture, and their land. Freeing his Crow ancestry from stereotypical, single-faceted representation, his paintings explode on the canvas in original depictions of traditional and modern human beings born in an American Indian context. For Red Star, being Crow is “a rich source of creative expression.”



Deeply interested in every aspect of his heritage, Red Star pays attention when elders speak of times past or ancient legends. He studies every detail of old photographs, paintings, and descriptive writings from earlier eras. He asks questions and pores over ledger drawings and buffalo-hide paintings as he soaks up Crow history as well as that of other American Indian

tribes. He is inspired by clan gatherings, powwows, and the annual Crow Fair. Out of this cultural immersion flows his subject matter: dancers in full regalia, warriors on horseback, herds of horses, references to the four sacred directions. “Crow history and tradition play a seminal role in the life of Kevin Red Star,” says Robert Knight, who worked on a comprehensive exhibition of Red Star’s paintings at the Yellowstone Art Museum before taking over as director of the Tucson Museum of Art. “That core influence is his touchstone and an inescapable part of everything he is or does. He is a ‘neo-traditionalist’ and like no other.”

Of all his subjects, Red Star’s portraits drive home his message about the diversity of the Crow people. These are unique individuals. He may broaden their shoulders, perhaps exaggerate facial features, or accentuate the face paint, but these are life-weary faces, proud survivors, with expressive eyes that gaze back with candor, challenge, pride, and compassion. Each feather, each headdress, piece of jewelry or body adornment is meaningful and carefully researched. At times he employs symbolic traditional objects to make a statement: teepees silhouetted against the sky or a close-up of a shield with all its artful detail. He includes oils, acrylics, ink, and collage in his repertoire, and often stipples and spatters series of thin washes to direct joyous, luminescent light onto a central figure or scene.

Red Star rises early each morning and by 7 a.m. he is painting in his expansive, warehouse-like studio. Light pours in from banks of windows. Large tables can be configured to meet his needs. In one corner, a living room has been set up with couches, a coffee table, and a television. There’s a drum set at the back, and a Mercedes-Benz is parked next to a midnight blue 1977 Corvette. His daughter, Sunny Sky Red Star-Bullard, also an artist, has her own designated work area and a wall to display her paintings. The remaining walls are covered with Red Star’s own paintings along with works by artists he enjoys. Large canvases in progress are scattered about on easels awaiting finishing touches. His studio is a “happy place,” he says, a place where he can be himself. He works until early afternoon, often playing inspirational DVDs in the background. One of his favorites, which he listens to repeatedly, is



Rhonda Byrnes's *The Secret*; he finds its positive message of joy and empowerment constantly reinforcing.

From an early age, Red Star remembers his parents, Amy Bright Wings and Wallace Red Star, encouraging him in his dream of being an artist. His father drew, loved western novels and antiques, and introduced young Kevin to classic Remington and Russell prints that he found in second-hand stores. A policeman and game warden in his younger years, his father played saxophone and Hawaiian steel guitar with a band called the Reservation Hot Shots, and the band and other family friends often jammed at the Red Star home.

Among Red Star's happiest childhood memories is watching his mother pursue her own art. No matter how busy with her large brood, she took time to get her Singer treadle sewing machine going, to make men's buckskin jackets, vests, and ladies' shawls and then bead them with Crow designs. Her beadwork also brightened moccasins, barrettes, and appliqués. Especially sought after were her Fancy Dancer costumes. It was a high point for Red Star and his mother when, in the 1970s, they exhibited a collaborative work—a teepee decorated with his bold paintings and her beautifully intricate beadwork—at the Southern Plains Indian Museum in Anadarko, OK.

Red Star was among the first students chosen to attend the newly formed Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, founded in 1962 by Dr. George Boyce and Lloyd Kiva New. This was the start of his formal art education, and it could not have been in a more supportive and stimulating environment. The transition from mainstream schooling where he was forbidden to speak his native language to a school where everyone, including the instructors and staff, was American Indian vastly expanded his world. It was a life-changing experience, and Red Star found mentors and formed friendships that have lasted a lifetime. At IAIA he was exposed to a host of mediums and styles and taught by the finest Native American teachers. The intense concentration on art, the opportunity to engage freely with other creative people, and the long, uninterrupted hours of work all provided the catalyst for new directions for Indian art.

Red Star's talent continued to be recognized and, shortly after graduating from IAIA, he won a scholarship to the San Francisco Art Institute. It was the height of the Haight-Ashbury days, but his world was not psychedelic posters or rock 'n' roll—it was days and nights, weeks and months, of exploring museums, studying methods and mediums, attending openings (where, he remembers, the free food was a big draw to a poor art student), and painting, always painting, drawing, sketching. He followed his education in California with studies at Montana State University in Bozeman and Eastern Montana College in Billings. Returning home, the young artist felt somewhat like an outsider on the reservation, as few there were connected to his

world. Still, he was hooked. Like a sponge, he soaked up techniques and ideas, constantly striving for improvement.

In 1974, IAIA invited Red Star to come back as an artist in residence. Many of his friends from his student days at IAIA were now living near Santa Fe. “They said they needed me, my energy,” he recalls. And he, too, was eager to recapture the exhilarating interaction and collaboration of that earlier time. He explored lithography, serigraphs, and etchings, and he and his friends constantly exchanged ideas. “We talked and lived art,” he remembers.



From that moment onward Red Star’s work came into its own. Today his paintings hang in national and international galleries, as well as in such notable venues as the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, the Autry National Heritage Center in Los Angeles, and the Espace Cardin in Paris. Red Star has wandered as well, spending a month in Russia, where he visited artists’ studios in Moscow and St. Petersburg’s famed Hermitage. He lived for a time in San Diego and did a stint in New York City. But, always, there was Montana, Santa Fe, family, and his art. And being Crow. He sees himself in a continuum, a part of a “great circle of Crow art.” When asked if his paintings carry a political message, he says, “No. I see myself as a recorder.” His art translates history, a unique culture, an endangered language, a way of being in the world.

Recently, Earth Magic Media, a production company based in Canada, chose Red Star as one of the first two Native artists from the United States to be featured in their From the Spirit series. Raymond Yakeleya, producer and director, said of the experience, “We were already fans of Kevin’s, but when we met him we were wonderfully surprised at his generosity of spirit. We realized how lucky we were to spend time with him.”

A friendly man with a warm smile, Red Star is always positive and passionate about life—a passion that is evident in his art. His paintings make viewers long for the iconic past of the West yet appreciate the rich Native American traditions that continue today. Red Star weaves past and present, the emotion of a people and a culture, into a bold, illuminated tapestry of paint and canvas.

Dossier Representation

Sorrel Sky Gallery, Durango, CO & Santa Fe, NM; SorrelSky.com