

FRITZ SCHOLDER



Excerpts from **Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian**

About the book

Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian will be published in October 2008 in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, a retrospective of the career of the late Fritz Scholder (1937–2005), on view at the museum on the National Mall and the George Gustav Heye Center in lower Manhattan, both beginning November 1, 2008.

Extensively illustrated with new photographs of Scholder's paintings, sculptures, and works on paper, *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian* brings art historical and cultural perspectives together to present new insights into this important 20th century artist.

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Book Excerpt

Introduction

Lowery Stokes Sims
Curator, Museum of Arts and Design, New York

He [Fritz Scholder] once counted among his friends and collectors the actor Robert Redford, the artist Andy Warhol, and pop icon/poet Rod McKuen. On the other hand—to his personal frustration during his lifetime—his work tended to be contextualized exclusively within Native American art. This narrow categorization persisted despite the fact that by his own account he did not identify himself as a Native American before his late twenties—focusing rather on the heterogeneity of his ethnic heritage—and notwithstanding his long and capable apprenticeship to

and practice of West Coast abstract expressionism and its figural manifestations. Scholder was, therefore, trapped in characterizations of his career that focused on his subject matter, the locale where he worked, his ethnic heritage, and the various romantic and misguided ideas that accompanied these elements and were thought to determine the character of his art. But as Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), associate curator at the National Museum of the American Indian and co-curator of the exhibition, has noted, Scholder *was* inextricably connected to Native art and the Southwestern scene. He became an important force in stimulating the growth of Santa Fe as a viable art center and will always be remembered as the artist who revolutionized Indian painting by creating some of the most volatile and transformative images of Native Americans. In the history of the image of Native Americans, there is what was created before Fritz Scholder and what came afterwards.

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Book Excerpt

Monster Love

Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche)

Co-curator / *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian*

Associate Curator, National Museum of the American Indian

"The Indians were a small part of my career, a series that seemed logical at the time. But an artist has to transcend a subject, or he loses the battle. The subject wins."

—Fritz Scholder, 1981

In the summer of 1994, news that Fritz Scholder was returning to Santa Fe with a show of new work, specifically a show of new work featuring Indians, produced a frisson of shock, delight, and nostalgia in the small city he had left two decades earlier. "Red Alert," the headlines read, "The man is back."

His absence all those years had only clarified his standing as the region's most celebrated artist, second only to Georgia O'Keeffe. He was gone, but you saw him everywhere: the Albuquerque airport, in the finest homes and museums and restaurants, on the walls of the dorm rooms and coffee shops, in the galleries of Santa Fe's Canyon Road, and decorating tiny kitchens in trailer homes, used bookstores, and university libraries.

In most state capitals, politics is the main topic of conversation, but in Santa Fe artists are the celebrities, and nearly everyone has Fritz Scholder stories, and the thrilling, unexpected news—Fritz Scholder Is Painting Indians Again!—gave everyone a chance to tell them once more. You knew him personally, or used to, or knew someone who did, or you met him once at an opening, or you owned a lithograph or poster. The old-timers, who lived in the sleepy town before it was chic and expensive, held court and recounted scenes from those magical years in the 1960s when the zeitgeist ran through Santa Fe.

The local newspaper described it this way: “The years Scholder lived in Santa Fe are referred to by many as the most notable period of the city’s fabled art scene, a time roughly bounded by the Nixon years on one end and the rise of the Reagan presidency on the other. It was the final years of Santa Fe as an inexpensive haven for artists. In many ways, the most enduring art legacy of those years was the emergence of Scholder’s haunting, energetic paintings of American Indians. His creative genius laid a cornerstone in the foundation that made today’s flourishing Santa Fe arts scene possible.” The article ended with a quote from the artist about why he was returning to the subject that made him famous. Acknowledging that he had once declared he would never paint Indians again, he found that after thirteen years he had more to say after all. He allowed that he discovered something else, too: “I’ve learned that you should never hem yourself in by making pronouncements.”

We should be grateful this was a lesson he only learned in his sixth decade. The extravagant, baffling, and still-consequential career of Fritz Scholder is framed by bold pronouncements, dichotomy, and contradiction. It is irresistible—and I surrender willingly—to treat them as one way of mapping the artist and making sense of his life and work.

Here’s the short list: the son of a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school administrator, who vowed he would never work for the BIA, who later teaches at a BIA art school. The abstractionist who turns to figuration. The artist who (twice) broke his promise to never paint Indians and was rewarded with fame, wealth, and endless controversy. The public intellectual who gave speeches about the New Indian Art Movement, who also said he didn’t believe in making statements. The recluse who starred in nationally televised documentaries and willingly painted before audiences all over the world. And, above all, this one: the man who revolutionized Indian painting, who also consistently, insistently, told everyone who would listen over five decades that he was not Indian. Except that he was proud of being one-quarter Luiseño. Except that perhaps he was a non-Indian Indian. As if trying to be helpful, Scholder also told us, over and over, that his favorite word was paradox. To which we can only say, no kidding.

Like many celebrities, Fritz Scholder always acted as if he were famous even before he became famous. No doubt this amused his family, but his talent, confidence, and single-mindedness gave them no reason to doubt he would succeed. He won his first contest in the fourth grade, and at nineteen made the local paper, hailed as a prodigy destined for great things. He posed with his painting, *The Life Cycle of Man* (1956).

As only a child desperate to escape the remote and gloomy Northern Plains could, Fritz Scholder knew how immense the world was. This knowledge made him determined to explore and experience everything it had to offer. He dreamed of Egypt and the pyramids, collected stamps, and drew for hours. Eventually, Fritz Scholder’s imagination and his pen collapsed time and space, and as a famous artist he would travel the world and paint the pyramids.

It would have been remarkable anywhere, but in Fritz's early years the Scholders lived in North Dakota border towns. During the brutal, unforgiving winters, they clung to ropes tied from house to barn to keep from blowing away into the night.

"We lived on the Indian school campus, because my father (who is half-Luiseño) worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. But we went to public schools. There were no Indian objects in the house. We never thought of ourselves as Indians. My father was a product of the old Indian schools—he was ashamed of being an Indian."

In the 1940s and 1950s, he was hardly alone. It was, Fritz's sister Sondra Scholder recalled, strange to be living among Indians their own age but to rarely see them. Fritz and Sondra attended public schools, not the BIA school where their father taught. It was never acknowledged or discussed. Scholder would describe his childhood as if Indians were far away and simply not a subject he or his family gave a moment's thought. In fact, the Indians were all around them, and even the absence of Indian objects was a vivid reminder of that fact. "When my parents were married, they were given beautiful Indian baskets, rugs, and pottery, but in a couple of years my father threw them all away. I grew up with not one Indian object in the house, except for a pot my father gave me for my crayons." In a Rosebud-like plot twist both too perfect to be true and too unlikely to be invented, as an adult Scholder would learn the black pot was made by the famous San Ildefonso Pueblo potter Maria Martinez.

He also would remember leafing through the pages of *Arizona Highways*, imagining what it would be like to live in the desert in a place where it was always warm. That memory was, in a way, like the account of the Martinez pot (and also perhaps less likely to be fictional) because it complicates the story of a family that never thought of themselves as Indians or had much to do with Indians. His father Fritz Scholder IV and Ella Mae Haney were married on the Hopi reservation in northeastern Arizona, on horseback. Ella Mae knew Hopi artists like Fred Kabotie, and was a typist for Oliver La Farge, the anthropologist, activist, and novelist. Scholder and his sisters also visited their Luiseño relatives in California.

While Fritz Scholder attended high school in Pierre, South Dakota, the art teacher happened to be Oscar Howe, one of the country's most prominent Indian painters. Howe, a Yanktonai Sioux, talked at length about what he had seen in Europe, about how that had changed his work, and showed his student paintings executed in the cubist style.

All of this—the BIA schools that determined where the family lived, the visits to the Luiseño relatives, the mentoring by a well-known Indian artist—happened during the times that Fritz Scholder said he never considered himself Indian or thought about Indians. What do we make of this? Part of the answer is that people like the Scholders considered Indians to be from reservations. During the mid twentieth century, it wasn't just the Bureau of Indian Affairs that believed Indians should be assimilated; it was also much of Indian Country. Concepts at the core of Indian values in the United States and Canada today—that traditional beliefs and practices must be preserved and continued, that languages and ceremonies should be protected at all costs, that being Indian is a good thing—were not the prevailing ideas back then. There were Indians in 1950 who argued and organized for these things, but they

were a small minority even in the most conservative (what we called “traditional” in those days) reservations. People like Fritz Scholder’s father were not Indians, they were “half-breeds,” a term then commonly used in both derogatory and matter-of-fact, descriptive ways.

For Fritz Scholder and his sisters to say they never considered themselves Indian is another way of saying they had little in common with the students at their father’s school, which was true. Embedded in those definitions is the notion that there was nothing valuable in exploring or deepening their own knowledge of the Indians who their father administered, the Hopis their mother knew, or the Lakotas and Winnebagos who lived a few hours’ drive away.

This was especially true for the teenage artist, driven to become a famous artist—of what possible use could knowing Indians, much less being Indian, be in reaching that goal?

The answer would turn out to be everything, because Indians in the United States were on the cusp of a massive cultural shift that nobody predicted, and few would have believed possible.