KIOWA SIX READING

Kiowa Culture and Traditions

In the early 1800s, the Kiowa were a nomadic tribe who lived primarily in the northern and central plains of what is now the United States. Tribal members had winter and summer camps that followed the migration of the bison, which was their main source of food, shelter, and leather goods. The economy revolved around hunting, trading, and breaking wild horses. The Kiowa also traded bison hides and horses for corn and agricultural products from neighboring tribes. Kiowa families were close-knit, large, and protective of one another.

The Kiowa also had a rich artistic tradition. They had no written language, so their history and life were shared through storytelling and with pictures. Men painted calendars, scenes of war, heroic deeds, dances, religious ceremonies, and other important events on rocks, hides, shields, and clothing. Later, men painted in ledger books—account books given to the Kiowa by government officials or through trade with settlers. Women traditionally created art through beadwork, clothing, and pottery. Traditional art methods and designs were passed from generation to generation.

Westward Expansion

With a booming number of European American settlers traveling west in pursuit of land for themselves, clashes with Native American tribes like the Kiowa were inevitable. The Kiowa and other tribes spent years resisting settlers' attempts to take their land. By the mid-1860s, the United States government prevailed in subduing Native uprisings, often by force.

U.S. government officials signed treaties with the Kiowa and other tribes that moved the tribes onto permanent reservations. These reservations forced a new lifestyle of farming and ranching, yet the Kiowa still shared their wealth and shared ownership of these new lands.

As settlers' demand for land steadily increased, the Dawes Act of 1887 was passed. The explicit aim of the Dawes Act was to create western settlements for European Americans, but the act effectively dissolved tribal ownership of the reservation lands that had been promised to tribes in prior treaties.

The Dawes Act allowed the federal government to break up reservation lands into smaller acreages, or **allotments**, and assign them to individual tribal members. Any "extra" allotments were then made available to European American homesteaders. Ultimately, 93% of the Kiowa's reservation land in southeastern Oklahoma was allotted for European American settlement. Without the ability to support all tribal members, most tribal members fell into poverty.

In addition to allotment, the U.S. government created policies that forbade tribal dancing, discouraged traditional dress, promoted farming, and encouraged the building of houses.

Policies like these were designed to force tribal **acculturation** and **assimilation** into the European American culture of the new settlers. Kiowa children were required to attend missionary or government-run boarding schools to “civilize” them.

St. Patrick’s Mission School and Art Club

Five Kiowa children, among many others, attended St. Patrick’s Mission School in Anadarko, Oklahoma, to learn English, receive English names, convert to the Roman Catholic religion, and train for manual service jobs. Four boys—Jack Hokeah, Spencer Asah, Stephen Mopope, and James Auchiah—and one girl, Lois Smoky, displayed artistic promise and were encouraged in their art by a Choctaw nun at the school, Sister Mary Olivia Taylor.

Susie Peters, a Kiowa Agency representative working with Kiowa families, also recognized the artistic creativity of the children. Peters created a children’s art club around 1918, which included students from St. Patrick’s school. Monroe Tsatoke, who attended another boarding school, was invited to join the club. Peters did not give the students art instruction, but she provided them with supplies and encouraged them to create their own works. She eventually arranged lessons for the children from a local artist, Willie Baze Lane.

The children in the art club painted what they knew best: Kiowa traditions and daily life. Hokeah, Asah, Smoky, and Mopope all came from a distinguished line of Kiowa artists. The children painted in the traditional Kiowa style, which they had learned from family and tribal members. Traditional Kiowa paintings had no background, used primarily solid lines with intricate designs, and were tinted in vibrant but matte [no shine] colors as filler. This unique style became known as flat-style painting.

University of Oklahoma and International Acclaim

Peters and Sister Taylor recognized the talents and artistry of the six Kiowa students and encouraged their work. Peters brought the students’ unique design and style to the attention of OU professor, art school director, and renowned painter Oscar Jacobson. In 1926, the students, now young adults, began to study at OU as part of an informal art program led by Jacobson.

Jacobson recognized the raw talent and the unique style that comprised the students’ artistry. He did not try to change their style nor their subject matter—the students received only basic painting instruction and critique of their work. Equally important in their creative efforts was their access to a fully equipped art studio through Jacobson and the university.

Jacobson introduced the group’s paintings to museums and exhibitions around the world. Through his contacts in the art world and the group’s unique style and talent, the Kiowa students achieved national and international acclaim. The men in the group later became known as the Kiowa Five. Eventually, as more people called attention to the importance of including Smoky’s name and work, the group became known as the Kiowa Six.

With Jacobson's help, the Kiowa artists created a traveling portfolio of work that was featured at the International Folk Art Congress in Prague, Czech Republic. The group's paintings also were exhibited at the Denver Art Museum and in other museums across the United States. A print portfolio of their paintings was published in Paris, France, in 1929. Italy's Venice Biennale in 1932 also featured Kiowa Six paintings as part of a wider exhibition of Native American and indigenous peoples' art.

As adults, the Kiowa Six received commissions and patronage for their artwork. During the Great Depression, many of the Kiowa Six were commissioned by the government to paint murals in post offices, schools, and federal buildings throughout Oklahoma and New Mexico.

The Legacy of the Kiowa Six

The Kiowa Six crossed a cultural boundary between Native Americans and the predominantly European American society of the United States. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Native Americans were often stereotyped as inferior or problematic. Through their art, the Kiowa Six entered a world that had denied access to Native Americans and other indigenous peoples. The Kiowa Six operated in two worlds, that of the dominant society and that of their tribal family. These Kiowa—several of whom were skilled ceremonial dancers, drummers, and singers—all participated fully in tribal life. They often appeared in traditional dress to acknowledge and preserve their culture and heritage.

The artistry of the Kiowa Six's paintings conveyed the beauty and dignity of the Kiowa people to a worldwide audience who knew little about Native Americans. Their breakthrough on the world stage paved the way for other indigenous artists to achieve recognition. In Oklahoma alone, Kiowa Six paintings hang and have been exhibited in the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, the Museum of the Great Plains, the Jacobson House Native Art Center, the Gilcrease Museum, and the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. Kiowa Six paintings are also in private collections and museums around the world.

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