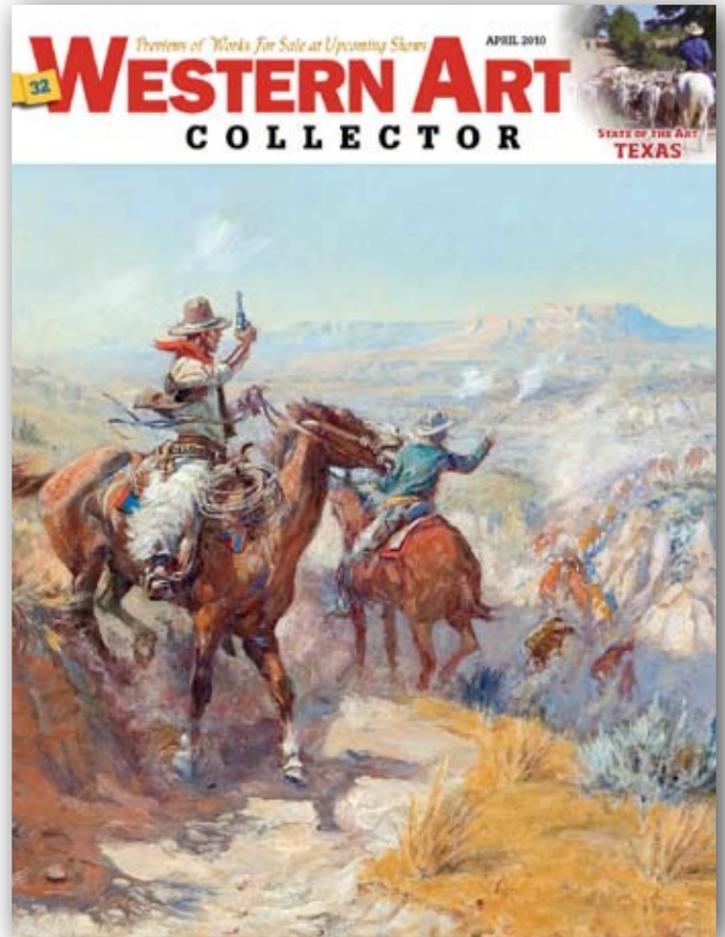


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Personal Journeys

Kay WalkingStick's paintings reveal an exploration of land, history and spirit.

By Christy A. Vezolles, AM

The evocative landscapes of Kay WalkingStick reveal a connection with the land that extends far beyond the ancestral homelands of her Oklahoma Cherokee father. Although she grew up in Syracuse, New York, without her father, her non-Indian mother taught her to value and take pride in her Indian heritage. She learned a love of the land that transcends any specific place—emanating from her birthplace in the East and extending to the mountains of the West.

To view a landscape by WalkingStick is to have an immediate realization of her love for the mountains and connectedness with the land.

"I like mountains for their rugged, bare, raw earth quality," she attests.

Best known for her powerful diptychs, the artist portrays jagged landscapes, often juxtaposed with more personal imagery of dancing figures or distinctive American Indian imagery drawn from parfleche patterns or woven cornhusk bag designs.

WalkingStick recalls her mother continually

exhorting her—"Make something of yourself, Kay!" Taking the words to heart, she attended college, earning a degree in fine arts in 1959. She married journalist Michael Echols and painted and taught part time at a local college while raising their two children.

WalkingStick made a series of Hudson River paintings in the 1960s. She explored figures in landscape throughout that decade and in the early 1970s using hard-edged shapes.

When the children were pre-teens,



We're Still Here, mixed media on paper, 25 x 50"

IMAGE COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY / PHOTO BY BECKET LOGAN



Remembering the Bitterroots, oil on wood panel, diptych, 36 x 72"
 IMAGE COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY / PHOTO BY BECKET LOGAN

she attended Brooklyn's Pratt Institute on a fellowship. In 1974 and '75, while in graduate school, she began her paintings relating to her Indian heritage, including her abstract Chief Joseph series. She earned her MFA in 1975. By then both parents had passed away. Other profound changes affected her as well.

"The second wave of the feminist movement was in high gear," she says. "The American Indian Movement was making headlines and Conceptualism and Minimalism were the interesting art movements."

These changes left an indelible mark on her and her personal expression.

By her proximity to New York City, it was inevitable that WalkingStick began exploring innovative media and techniques, along with uniquely biographical ideas and concepts. Then, as now, her paintings reflected a deep, quiet pride in her ancestry and her inborn abiding passion for the land.

Seeking to better understand and express her own heritage and the history of the Cherokee

and other tribes, she began searching other means of expression, colors and forms that satisfied her sensibilities as a contemporary artist and at the same time addressed the need to communicate her understanding of her own duality as a biracial woman. Concerned with allowing the energy within her to literally flow into her artwork, she loved the sensuous tactile experience of moving paint about with her hands.

Influenced by Jasper Johns' encaustic paintings—a process that incorporates paint, wax and heat—WalkingStick experimented with a similar process using cold (saponified) wax mixed with acrylic, in about 1976.

Faced with the need to produce an artwork for a thematic exhibit in the mid-1980s, she developed her trademark diptych format. The format—incorporating two individual paintings as a single artwork—lends itself well to WalkingStick's incessant exploration of various dualities, particularly addressing themes of the body and spirit, life and



Kay WalkingStick in her studio.
 IMAGE COURTESY ARCADIA UNIVERSITY, GLENSIDE, PA / PHOTO BY MATTHEW A. WOLF



Our Land, oil on wood panel, diptych, 32 x 64"

IMAGE COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY / PHOTO BY BECKET LOGAN

death, history and present, and realism and abstraction.

WalkingStick secured a teaching position at Cornell University in 1988. This professional milestone was soon overshadowed by the devastating passing of her husband of 29 years in 1989. In her personal journey through her grief, the artist channeled her anguish into her painting, creating a powerful body of work that employed the diptych format utilizing heavy wax impasto on one side and oil paint on the other.

A few years later, Anthony Janson, son of the renowned H. W. Janson, author of *The History of Art*, happened to visit a New

York gallery that represented the painter. Working on the fifth edition of his father's text, he was struck by her work and sought to include it in the revision. The gallery sent off the requested materials but did not inform WalkingStick. She learned of Janson's interest only upon reading a letter from the publisher in the gallery's records, when she changed gallery representation.

Because the elder Janson's earlier editions were notorious for excluding women and minority artists, the bewildered WalkingStick contacted the publisher to question whether the author was writing a supplementary text. Anthony Janson himself assured her that his

intent was to include her in the full edition of the book. They began corresponding, leading to a lasting friendship.

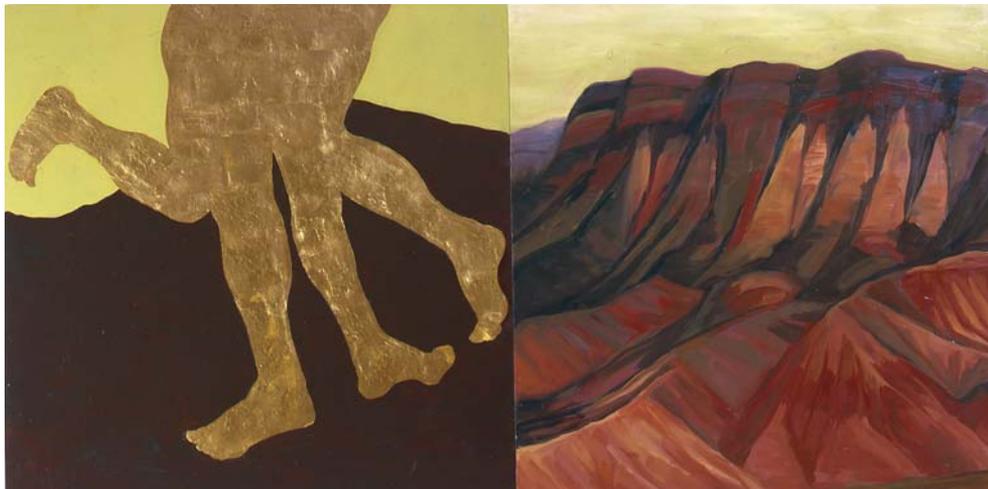
To fully realize the significance of Kay WalkingStick's work being included, one must first understand the longstanding importance of Janson's *The History of Art*. The canonical text has been the cornerstone of the study of art history since it was first published in 1962. Joining the ranks of other women artists such as Mary Cassatt and Louise Nevelson, WalkingStick is one of only a few women, and the first American Indian artist—male or female—to be included.

From 1996 to 2003, Cornell University's



Arroyo, oil on wood panel, diptych, 16 x 32"

IMAGE COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY / PHOTO BY BECKET LOGAN



Gioiso III, New Mexico, oil and gold leaf on wood panel, diptych, 32 x 64"

IMAGE COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY / PHOTO BY BECKET LOGAN

Roman Program granted WalkingStick the opportunity to spend extended periods in Italy on three occasions. She immersed herself in teaching, visiting museums and sketching the classic sculptures, as well as the Italian Alps.

The artist reveals that around that time, "I realized that the landscapes depicted in my paintings had become a stand-in for my body. Although all painting is a portrait of the artist to some extent, once I had come to this understanding of body I felt justified to include figures in my work."

The opulent dramatic effect of gold leaf she saw used in the Italian Renaissance

paintings found its way into her diptychs, as seen in the sumptuous *Gioiso III, New Mexico*, wherein two gilded figures dance exuberantly, in contrast to the staid and stolid mountain formation with which they are paired. The second painting from this series is found in the collection of Indianapolis' Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art.

The artist's significance was summed up by June Kelly, when contacted at the New York gallery that bears her name. "Kay WalkingStick is a major American artist whose work expresses the universal values and images of our common experience,"

Kelly says. "She has received significant, positive reviews from art critics and major publications and has been included in many important museum exhibitions throughout the United States."

Indeed, an impressive and diverse cross section of prominent museums from coast to coast have WalkingStick's work in their permanent collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., the Eiteljorg in Indianapolis, the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, the Denver Art Museum, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, and the Museum of



Hear the Voices, oil on wood panel, diptych, 12 x 48"
IMAGE COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY / PHOTO BY BECKET LOGAN



Farewell to the Smokies, oil on wood panel, diptych, 36 x 72"
IMAGE COURTESY JUNE KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY / PHOTO BY BECKET LOGAN, PART OF THE DENVER ART MUSEUM COLLECTION



Contemporary Art in San Diego.

Museum curators know that the Cherokee artist's works, though visually stunning, are much more than just pretty pictures. WalkingStick's landscapes are often portrayals of historically significant places and events.

In the haunting *Farewell to the Smokies*, recently acquired by the Denver Art Museum, tiny figures trudge across the bottom edge of the painting. WalkingStick recounts the tragic Trail of Tears, wherein the Cherokee people were forced to leave their homelands and relocated to Indian Territory, now known as Oklahoma.

Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe, greatly admired by the artist's father, figures prominently in her paintings. *Our Land* and *Remembering the Bitterroots* depict the unsuccessful 1,100-mile journey on which the chief led 800 of his people in their quest for a homeland in Canada. The tribe was stopped just 40 miles short of the border, where they fought valiantly for five days before conceding defeat.

The elongated format of *Hear the Voices*

emphasizes the protracted journey of the Nez Perce. The painting represents the Bear Paw Battlefield and the site where Chief Joseph surrendered, delivering his eminently eloquent "I will fight no more forever" speech.

In contrast, WalkingStick joyously celebrates the continuing viability and endurance of American Indian culture in *We're Still Here*, a colorful painting that combines the legs of silhouetted dancing figures and a primary-colored parfleche design. Richly colored *Arroyo* displays a daytime view of a mountainous desert environment, divided diagonally by an arroyo—a dry creek bed that fills with water after a spring rain. It is juxtaposed against a stylized twilight view of the same subject, which incorporates abstracted cornhusk motifs. Both components of the diptych are life-affirming and ripe with possibility.

Whether appreciated solely for the majestic beauty conveyed in the expansive mountainous landscapes, or for the deeper, more meaningful expressions of historic importance, the paintings of Kay WalkingStick

reveal an exploratory journey of the lands, the history and the people of this nation, as well as a personal journey into self and spirit. ✎

Christy Vezolles, founder of Art Value LLC, is an accredited member of the American Society of Appraisers. She specializes in American and European fine art and is a recognized expert in American Indian art. She serves on the board of the Western Art Associates at the Phoenix Art Museum. Christy has traveled nationally and internationally to appraise client collections. She is a member of ArtTable, a national organization for professional women in the arts. Christy has served many times as a judge at the Heard Museum Indian Fair and Market in Phoenix and at the SWAIA Indian Market in Santa Fe.

