



Gilbert Benjamin Atencio [also known as Wah Peen] (San Ildefonso Pueblo, 1930–1995)
Deer Dancer, 1953, Watercolor on heavy paper, Gift of Charles Little, 2016.004.005

Collector's Statement

My collection began in 1965 when I came to work at Oklahoma State University. From a very early age, I was fascinated by the American Indian. Being in Oklahoma, I was able to interact directly with Native Americans for the first time. I spent most weekends attending powwows or art shows throughout the state. I was attracted to paintings by Native American artists, particularly those in the traditional, flat style. I am aware of the controversy about the early traditional paintings, but whatever the view, they are an important part of the history of Native American art. Early on, I decided to concentrate on that history and attempted to obtain paintings by as many Native artists as possible. I have also amassed a substantial amount of biographical data about the artists in the collection, most of whom are from the Plains states and the Southwest. I am glad that students researched the artists exhibited in this show. I hope this is the first step to finding out as much as possible about the artists in the collection, particularly those from Oklahoma, and I look forward to more such shows in the future.

– Charles Little

Curators' note: The controversy to which Mr. Little refers stems from debates about the role played by non-Native teachers who encouraged Native American students to paint in the flat style, as well as to more recent conversations about the relationship between flat-style painting and modern and contemporary American art more broadly. For more on these issues, see Christina E. Burke, *Impact: The Philbrook Indian Annual, 1946-1979* (Tulsa: Philbrook Museum of Art, 2014).

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We are grateful to the many members of our community who shared knowledge and stories with us throughout our research. In addition, we consulted the following sources:

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COVER IMAGE: Cliff Bahnimptewa (Hopi, 1937–1984)

Eagle Katsina Dancer, 1982, Watercolor on paper, Gift of Charles Little, 2016.004.009

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The Southwest in Motion

*Navajo, Pueblo, and Hopi Paintings
from the Charles Little Collection*

JUNE 11 - SEPTEMBER 14, 2019

From the settlement of Pueblo cities a thousand years ago to the Long Walk of the Diné (Navajo) one hundred and fifty years ago, movement has shaped the Southwest and the people who call it home.

Over time, their seasonal agricultural work and historic urban architecture joined with the play of wind and rain to shape the canyons, buttes, and mesas of the region — and like the landscape itself, the people and their work continue to evolve. This exhibition includes works by Diné, Hopi, and various Pueblo artists that explore the theme of motion: the dramatic silhouette of a horse-rider's hair blowing in the breeze, the energy of shepherds chasing after their flock, the calm deliberation of a young woman gathering corn-pollen, and more. Together, they invite visitors to discover the complex relationship between culture, place, resistance, and survival in the Southwest.

Alongside the Indigenous history of the Southwest, colonial wars also left their mark on the region and its people, including the 1540 invasion of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, the 1680 Pueblo Rebellion, and the numerous conflicts of the nineteenth century. Conflicts have continued through the twentieth century and into the present, with Native Nations defending their lands and sovereignty against uranium mining, gas and oil drilling, and other environmentally destructive exploitation. In this exhibition, representations of the landscape focus on its natural features, from subtle nods to the indigenous plants of the region, such as a yucca in a desert panorama, to spectacular images of the buttes and mountains of Monument Valley. These landscapes are not simply picturesque; in the oral traditions of Southwestern tribes, the land is the site of both spiritual and physical creation. The land, the people, and their history are thus inseparably intertwined: protecting the land is protecting life, and fundamentally, life is motion.

As Santa Clara Pueblo artists Tito Naranjo and Rina Swentzell put it, "movement is the revered element of life," mirrored in the daily actions of tribal people, their religious traditions, and even in the physical act of creation.¹ In other words, the concept of *motion* is spiritual, social, and political as well as biological and spatial. The artists featured in this exhibition celebrate life through the depiction of ceremonial, domestic, and environmental motion. In each of the images in this exhibition, the artist captures a lived experience that is ongoing, changing, and vibrant—a far cry from theories of extinction that dominated nineteenth-century colonial attitudes toward Native Americans. These paintings testify to a rich relationship between artist, community, tradition, and history.

Many of the paintings in this exhibition depict dancers associated with ceremonies throughout the Southwest. Historically subject to repression by colonial and missionary forces, and often exploited by outsiders for economic gain, ceremonies are carefully protected by Native people throughout the region.² Performed in secrecy when they were outlawed by the U.S. government, and closed to outsiders when it became clear that tourists were disruptive and openly flouted community bans on documentation or recording, ceremonies in the Southwest—bodies in motion — have been a primary site of resistance for Indigenous people. Yet, they also remain one of the region's primary tourist attractions, by attendance in person and through representations in painting, photography, literature, and film. In selecting work for this exhibition, we strove to understand and respect the preferences, both historical and contemporary, of the artists, their communities, and in cases where it differed, the source communities of their imagery.

As a metaphor, *motion* unites the paintings and drawings on view: the images depict not only the motion of Indigenous people and their relationship to their homelands in the Southwest, but also the gestures necessary to create art. From



Dennis Belindo (also known as Aun-So-Te) (Kiowa and Navajo, 1938–2009)
Native Man with Bone Whistle, 1981, Acrylic on paper, Gift of Charles Little, 2018.008.012

ancient petroglyphs, to the two-dimensional "flat" style that characterized Native painting in the first half of the twentieth century, to the increasing diversity of contemporary art, motion also suggests the way Native painters have championed self-representation. Creating a sense of motion and interplay between themselves, their subject, and their audience, these artists convey how they see themselves—their communities, histories, and individual legacies. Dennis Belindo (Kiowa/Diné), one of the artists in the exhibition, described the motion in his work in terms that echo a Diné philosophy of balance and harmony. "I am fascinated by form, movement, color and tension within the picture plane," he asserted in 1983, quickly clarifying that the tension in his paintings "is quieted by balance, harmony, feeling and emotion."³

This exhibition represents artists from many tribes, and therefore includes imagery drawn from many tribal histories and traditions. For some of the artists, painting was explicitly aligned with cultural preservation, and was just one aspect of their efforts in that regard. For example, Cliff Bahnimptewa's (Hopi) paintings of katsinam were part of a collaborative project to document them for posterity. Other artists combined visual art with preservation efforts in other arenas, ranging from the arts, to education, and even environmental stewardship. In the early 2000s, Belindo directed the Kiowa Language Project, and Myron Beeson continues to carve and play traditional flutes. Both remind us that many of the paintings and drawings in this exhibition are representations of ceremony; the dances they depict are accompanied by music and songs, all in motion together.

Although cultural preservation was an important goal for these artists, their paintings were created for non-tribal collectors. The artworks were likely intended

not only to preserve cultural knowledge but also to communicate the value of that knowledge to audiences in a position to advocate for, celebrate, and help protect it. Many of the artists in this exhibition were also politically active: Juan Aquino (San Juan Pueblo) and Gilbert Atencio (San Ildefonso Pueblo) were both tribal governors, for example; Belindo was a lawyer and activist who negotiated between leaders of the US federal government and the American Indian Movement during the AIM occupations of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Wounded Knee; and several of the artists in the show served in the military. They knew well the power that outsiders had over Indigenous culture, and likely saw their work in terms of cultural diplomacy, as well as aesthetics and economics.

The twenty paintings included in *The Southwest in Motion* are a first glimpse into a generous gift from Charles Little to the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Like the artists and artworks in this exhibition, the museum is continually in motion, with changing exhibitions and a growing permanent collection. When Little donated over a thousand paintings to the museum in 2015, he observed, "There are a lot of good artists who are barely known at all." We hope that this exhibition is a step forward, introducing some of these artists to new audiences and sharing what we have learned about them. The exhibition has been curated by Oklahoma State University students — Roxanne Beason, Calli Heflin, Katelynn Pipestem, Chestiké Williams, and Amanda Zimmerman — under the direction of faculty members Dr. Trever Lee Holland and Dr. Louise Siddons, with the help of our colleagues, Dr. Farina King (Northeastern State University), Marwin Begaye (University of Oklahoma), and artist Myron Beeson. The show has been an opportunity for us and for our students to consider how artworks themselves are often in motion, traveling from artist, to collector, to museum. Education is knowledge in motion. We are proud to share our students' work, and grateful for the support of our colleagues.

Louise Siddons, OSU Associate Professor in Art History

Trever Lee Holland, OSU Visiting Assistant Professor in American & Native Literature

Student curators: Roxanne Beason, Calli Heflin, Katelynn Pipestem, Chestiké Williams, and Amanda Zimmerman

¹ Damian Garcia and Kurt F. Anschuetz, "Movement as an Acoma Way of Life" in *The Continuous Path: Pueblo Movement and the Archaeology of Becoming*, ed. Samuel Duwe and Robert W. Preuce (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 37–58.

² Tisa Wenger, "Land, Culture, and Sovereignty in the Pueblo Dance Controversy," *Journal of the Southwest* 46, no. 2, Scholarship from the William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies (Summer 2004): 381–412.

³ "Paintings by Dennis Belindo [exhibition brochure]," Southern Plains Indian Museum and Crafts Center, Anadarko, OK, March 13–April 7, 1983.

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