

## Prospero

Rethinking the canon

# A new exhibition resurrects a forgotten modern master

*T.C. Cannon was a pioneering painter of Native American life*



2019 Estate of T. C. Cannon/ Thosh Collins

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IN THE early 20th century Native American art was dominated by the work of the Kiowa Six. The collective drew on Plains hide painting and Ledger art (sketches on paper or cloth), depicting scenes from oral histories to evoke a seemingly lost way of life. Men and women were rendered in an almost cartoonish style, usually hunting, dancing or performing rites; they often wore headdresses or traditional clothing. Karen Kramer, a curator specialising in Native American and Oceanic Art, judges that such iconography persisted for decades because “the art market was hungry for this sentimental imagery of Native life that never seemed to change.”

In the '60s, as other ideas about American identity were being questioned, so too did representations

of Native Americans evolve. The Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, encouraged its students to depict their heritage using all the tools art and art history provided. As Alfred Young Man, one pupil, explained, they “revelled in the popularity of pop and op [optical] art, and abstract expressionism, and how the French impressionists painted.”

T.C. Cannon, part Kiowa and part Caddo, was also among that group, and a new exhibition at the Museum of the American Indian in New York celebrates his unique visual style and pioneering depictions of Native Americans. Like other artists at the time, he gravitated towards more figurative art after an era defined by abstraction. Cannon was particularly drawn to the Fauvists and their expressive, non-naturalistic, use of colour. He combined styles found in the work of Western painters such as Henri Matisse and Vincent Van Gogh with traditional Native American imagery.

In “Law North of the Rosebud, 1971”, for example, Cannon depicts a tribal policeman against a flat background of red, blue, purple and lime green. A sheriff’s star is pinned to his label and braids spill from a ten-gallon hat, but in his case aviator glasses obscure a more personal identity. He stands with his hand on his hip, slightly slouching, as if tired or unimpressed. The simple modernity of the picture—and its subject’s reluctance to pose—seems like a refusal to bow to what a viewer might want from an “Indian” picture.



2019 Estate of T. C. Cannon/Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art

Elsewhere, Cannon refers to the most recognisable figures in Western art history: the Madonna and the reclining nude. “Cloud Madonna” (1975, pictured top right) uses the intense shade of blue often found in pictures of Mary, but this woman is carrying a gourd, not an infant; she balances a ceramic water jar on her head. The nude in “Collector #3” (1974, pictured above), meanwhile, borrows the pose of Titian’s “Venus of Urbino” but makes the setting wildly colourful, a mishmash of patterns.

Cannon enlisted in the US Army in 1966, and a large part of the show is given over to this period. Several posters on display elsewhere in the museum address the apparent paradox of Native American military service, questioning why individuals would serve an army and government that attacked their culture. For many, enlisting was seen as noble, a continuation of the Kiowa warrior tradition, but Cannon returned from his service deeply troubled about his role in the Vietnam war and more cynical about his country. This disillusionment influenced his art. “Two Guns Arikara” (1974-1976, pictured top left), made after his return from the war, seems at first to be another Fauvist delight. The aged warrior, sat in an armchair, has long, violet hair; polka dots form the background. But upon close inspection, it becomes clear that the painting is not playful. The man’s face is grave, peering out of the frame as if expecting someone. He clutches a pistol in each hand.

“T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America” is an excellent survey of a dynamic, inventive and wide-ranging artist. As well as the 30 paintings on display, visitors can enjoy his beautiful and sombre poems and listen to his songs (Bob Dylan, one of Cannon’s musical influences, also appears as the subject of a portrait). The exhibition lays bare Cannon’s technical skill, his humour and his ability to distill emotion in both word and colour. Four decades after his death in a car accident, aged just 31, he is finally receiving the recognition he deserves for his outsize influence and talent.

*“T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America” is at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York until September 16th*

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About *The Economist*