Spring 2013

The Man and the Myth: Clyfford Still and the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation

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The Man and the Myth: 
Clyfford Still and the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation

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Defended on November 7, 2013

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Abstract

The numerous early drawings made by the enigmatic Abstract Expressionist, Clyfford Still, have remained largely undiscovered due to the strict requirements of the artist’s will. Still demonstrated a fast-paced development of a unique aesthetic leading to abstraction as a young man; however, the earliest known drawings, circa 1920, are stylistically consist with a group of drawings performed over fifteen years later, in 1936, when the artist visited the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation to record the unique Native American culture. As evident through multiple diary entries and drawings, the stylistic shift back to a juvenile aesthetic reveals both Still’s interest in thoroughly documenting his experience on the reservation and his deep sympathy he felt for the Natives, whose way-of-life paralleled Still’s childhood environment. Furthermore, Still’s mythical and philosophical framework for his iconic abstractions share many similarities with the Native religious beliefs of the Washington plateau area. This discovery can be more broadly understood within Still’s later work in addition to the twentieth century art historical phenomenon of Primitivism.
Acknowledgements

The Clyfford Still Museum has generously allowed me to include many images from their collection and documents from their archives as the primary foundation of this thesis. I extend my warmest thanks to the museum for such generosity.

Dr. Bob Nauman has been a generous source of guidance and wisdom as my thesis advisor. Thank you, Dr. Nauman, for connecting me with the Clyfford Still Museum and numerous wonderful opportunities since the beginning.

Bailey Harberg, Collections Manager for the Clyfford Still Museum, has guided my research endeavors and helped me navigate the museum's rich collection, for which I am extremely grateful.

Dean Sobel, Director of the Clyfford Still Museum, generously provided me with an amazing opportunity to work and study at the museum. My thanks to all the exceptional staff at the Clyfford Still Museum for their help.

Dr. Kira Van Lil and Dr. Paul Gordon have been my additional thesis committee members; thank you for your support and patience.
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Introduction

Not much is known of the early life of Clyfford Still\(^1\) despite devoting himself to a lifetime of painting and an œuvre of more than 2,400 works.\(^2\) Because Still dedicated himself to maintaining the integrity of his vision by excessively limiting the exhibition of his paintings, many of the works have never been viewed by the public. After his death in 1980, Still chose to give his entire estate (about 94% of the artist’s life work) to a museum, built exclusively for the artist, which would following the highly specific stipulations laid out in his one-page will.\(^3\) The city to erect this museum, chosen by his late wife, was required to maintain and display solely Still’s work.

The Clyfford Still estate, thus, remained hidden from view for decades due to the challenge of finding suitable candidates to meet the staunch criteria of the artist’s will, which even limited what could be sold in the museum’s gift shop. A Westerner at heart, Still bred a deeply-held cynicism for the New York art world.\(^4\) Though Still’s widow, Patricia, would not live to see the Clyfford Still Museum built, Denver was chosen to receive the Still estate nearly thirty years after the artist’s death.\(^5\) With the opening of the Clyfford Still Museum in 2011, access to the artist’s complete archives has now become available. Because of my own personal relationship with the Still museum, I am fortunate to be able to utilize this immense yet largely unknown collection for the


\(^3\) Ibid, 36.


\(^5\) Ibid, 40.
scholarly goals of this thesis. A broad understanding of the artist’s development as a painter is imperative to realizing a multi-faceted outlook on Clyfford Still. Though scholarly work on the artist has addressed his role as a mature member of the Abstract Expressionists, many feel only a simplistic view of Clyfford Still’s work has been achieved due to the lack of visibility of his complete oeuvre. By more thoroughly examining Still’s early drawings from the museum’s collection, this paper will thus attempt to attain a more complete picture of an artist, who until recently, had fallen into obscurity compared to the success of his counterparts.

Clyfford Still led a life with one foot one the West Coast and one foot on the East Coast. Little is known specifically of Still’s early life besides what was published in catalogues, censored, of course, by the artist. Still came from especially humble circumstances as the son of a homesteader growing up in Alberta, Canada where his family attempted to cultivate crops on meager plot of land during a record drought. An avid drawer and painter since childhood, Still went on to study art and humanities at Washington State College, receiving his master’s degree there in 1935 at age thirty-one. He spent the summers as a young man participating in artists’ colonies, like the Trask Foundation (now Yaddo) in Saratoga Springs, New York, eventually starting a colony in Nespelem, Washington after becoming a professor of painting at Washington State College. For the last half of the 1930s, what began as masterful and realistic sketches of the farm became hugely psychological and grief-ridden studies of the figure. No longer

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6 Ibid, 15.
8 Dean Sobel, and David Anfam, Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum, 62, 83.
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working from life, Still’s paintings from the late 1930s demonstrate a profound shift in the artist’s focus from capturing the everyday to communicating an emotional weightiness. With the advent of the United States entering into World War II, Still relocated to San Francisco where he aided in the war effort. Though there was a lull in productivity for the artist during this time, his art continued to advance to more phantasmagorical images of totems, bones, and atmospheric landscapes.

It was in San Francisco Still met Mark Rothko after taking on a teaching job at the California School of Fine Arts. He eventually held his first solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art before he moved to Richmond, Virginia in 1943. The 1940s proved to be a formative period for Still. His connections within the art community coincided with a drastic increase in productivity and creativity in his work; all of which would culminate in his moving to New York in 1950. Still withdrew from representational art practices quickly during his time in Richmond, reaching fully abstracted images by the mid-1940s. Between 1945 and 1950, Still would peripatetically move between New York and San Francisco, all the while creating relationships with artistically sympathetic individuals like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. He began participating in major exhibitions, including his first solo exhibition in 1946 at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery.

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9 Ibid, 62.
10 Ibid, 15.
11 Ibid, 144.
12 See note above.
13 Ibid, 156.
14 Ibid, 15.
15 Ibid, 156.
By the time Still had permanently relocated to New York, he had already mastered a highly attuned style while simultaneously becoming a major force in the art world. Still exhibited work in the landmark show, *15 Americans*, first displayed in 1952 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.\(^{17}\) Included in this exhibition were what are now some of the most recognized and exalted American artists of the twentieth century, like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, William De Kooning, and Barnett Newman. Jackson Pollock, who many see as the foremost leader of Abstract Expressionist painting during the 1950s, would say, “Still makes the rest of us look academic.”\(^{18}\)

Beginning in the early 1950s, Clyfford Still thus became recognized as one of the founding members and recognized contributors to Abstract Expressionism, a stylistic movement whose influences are still felt among contemporary artists. What began in the 1940s as a loosely associated group of innovative artists, “Abstract Expressionism” or the “New York School” became one of the most instrumental and highly original movements from the twentieth century.\(^{19}\) Emphasizing spontaneity and individualistic expression, the Abstract Expressionists can be characterized by the energetic, gestural quality of their work in addition to, above all else, a focused development of the inherent qualities of the medium (strictly painting) in the form of total abstraction.\(^{20}\)

Though many of the artists associated with the New York School come from diverse backgrounds, the events of the early twentieth century, like the Great Depression

\(^{17}\) Ibid, 116.


\(^{20}\) See footnote 17 above.
and World War II, would have a lasting impact on their generation.\textsuperscript{21} Key to understanding the ambiguity and wild gesticulation of the Abstract Expressionists is their intense interest in the dark side of human interaction and the irrationality of the human psyche born from the seemingly unfounded and terrible events of the 1930s and 1940s.\textsuperscript{22} Rejecting the provincialism and political intemperance of Social Realism and Regionalism that preceded them, the Abstract Expressionists instead turned to the dynamic influx of avant-garde European art from the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{23} While paying particular attention to the Surrealism for its focus on the subconscious, these artists also studied the work of Dadaism, Cubism, the Russian Avant-Garde, and Post-Impressionism as examples of early deviations from realism.\textsuperscript{24} Beginning with a search for a timeless, culture-less subject matter, the Abstract Expressionists eventually moved from figural works based in ancient myth and archaic cultures to purely gestural, non-objective works super charged with the stylistic energy characteristic of the individual painter.\textsuperscript{25}

Though Clyfford Still developed as a painter relatively isolated from the New York art scene, his inclusion in the group can be attributed both to his exchange of ideas between other members of the New York School and the highly original sculptural surfaces of Still’s large-scale abstract paintings, qualities which were praised and repeated in the work of other Abstract Expressionists. Though Still’s early friendships with the other artists of the group nurtured an active artistic dialogue among the group

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
(most famously, through an exchange of several letters), he would become quickly disillusioned with the art world shortly after taking residence in New York in 1950. The politics of popularity and the commercial success of Abstract Expressionist paintings cheapened the meaning of the artwork, in Still’s mind, and corrupted many of his fellow artists. Through many correspondences, Still would officially end his relationship with Betty Parsons in 1951 in addition to many other gallerists, museum directors, and artists.\footnote{Dean Sobel, and David Anfam, \\Clyfford Still: The Artist's Museum, 24.} While Still further limited the exposure of his work to the public, his counterparts exhibited frequently and internationally.\footnote{Ibid, 15.} However, the movement would lose momentum with the advent of the 1960s as the Abstract Expressionists felt the enduring pressure of celebrity. A notorious alcoholic, Pollock would tragically lose his life in a car accident in 1956, followed by Barnett Newman’s withdrawal from the art world similar to Still’s.\footnote{Ibid, 26.} Most telling of this commercial pressure leading to the deterioration of the group, Rothko would commit suicide in 1970. Yet, despite the turmoil of the commercial and cultural clashes of the New York art scene in the 1950s, Clyfford Still would make his most iconic work during this period, further redefining and pinpointing his distinctive aesthetic.\footnote{Ibid.} Remaining seemingly immune to the drama which plagued his colleagues, Still would write, “I hold it imperative to evolve an instrument of thought which will aid in cutting through all cultural opiates, past and present, so that a direct, immediate, and truly free vision can be achieved.” \footnote{Ibid.}
In 1961, the newly married Clyfford Still and his second wife, Patricia, would distance themselves from the art world further by moving to rural Maryland where they would remain for the rest of Still’s life.\(^3^1\) After his relocation to Maryland, Still maintained even stricter stipulations for the public display of his work. Particularly, he maintained that his canvases could not be displayed next to any other artist in order to display a developed representation of his lifelong vision; a privilege Still felt was not singular to him.\(^3^2\) For the remaining decades of Still’s life, the artist would reject numerous museum and gallery exhibitions, choosing to participate in only a select few; however, his productivity remained constant. Journeying from a lighter palette to almost entirely bare canvas save for a few marks, the artist’s work would grow in scale to the numerous grandiose fifteen foot canvases by the time of his death in 1980.\(^3^3\) His most notable exhibition was a one-man retrospective in 1979 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which displayed seventy-nine of Still’s paintings, a testament to the artist’s importance to the artistic community.\(^3^4\) Working with his devoted wife, Patricia, Still would laboriously document and archive all of his works, which he kept since as early as the 1920s. These archives would join the thousands of paintings and drawings as part of the artist’s complete estate.

With the hope of forging a more a complete view of the artist who was so famously reclusive, this paper will address a small cross-section of the over 1,500 works on paper never displayed during Still’s lifetime.\(^3^5\) Still created many of these works on

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 29.
\(^{32}\) Ibid, 23.
\(^{33}\) Ibid, 36.
\(^{34}\) Ibid, 33.
\(^{35}\) Ibid, 36.
paper as a young man, offering an intimate view of the artist’s early life, which has remained relatively unknown yet profoundly significant to the development of his work. Specifically, I will focus on the artist’s involvement in founding Washington State College’s artist colony in Nespelem, Washington, which brought Still in close contact with the unique native culture on the Colville Reservation.

The first chapter of this paper will thus describe Still’s childhood in relation to his development as an artist, focusing on the stylistic qualities of the earliest known drawings and photographs. The artist’s experience of the Canadian Dust Bowl of the 1920s proves to be monumental to the artist’s perspective, leading up to his time in Nespelem.

The second chapter will provide a more detailed examination of the way in which scholars have regarded Still’s early development as an artist. This chapter will focus specifically on David Anfam’s thorough research, particularly Anfam’s perspective on how the artist transitioned from figural representation to totally abstracted images. Anfam’s argument for the mythological groundwork for Still’s paintings will be discussed in detail.

Chapter three will focus on Still’s experience on the Colville Reservation in 1936. This chapter will highlight a number of drawings made by the artist during this time as well as examine the cultural, spiritual, and political history of the people Still encountered. This Native history will be related to the specific drawings and diary entries Still kept during this time.

The fourth chapter will identify the ideological similarities between the religious beliefs of the Native culture and Still’s own mythological interests as they pertain to his early childhood experiences. This chapter will contextualize these interactions Still had
with the people of the Colville Reservation in Nespelem within the broader movement of Primitivism. A critical overview of this phenomenon will be provided as it pertains to Still and other artists within the Abstract Expressionists.

Though this thesis will not attempt to provide a thorough examination of all of Still’s work that is yet unseen, the selection of drawings provided in this paper demonstrate a profound connection to Still’s work for the rest of his life. Critical to understanding these drawings, however, is a careful investigation of Still’s childhood as it pertains to the artist’s early aesthetic development.
Chapter 1: Early Still in Alberta, Drawings and Photographs, 1920-1925

Mark Rothko would describe Still in his first solo exhibition catalogue as “…working out West- and alone.”\(^3\)\(^6\) Indeed, the formative years for the artist were spent in relative isolation on the Canadian prairie. The harshness of the climate and the toll of hard labor fostered in Still a unique perspective different from his peers in the Abstract Expressionist group. Clyfford Still’s experiences as a boy in Canada nurtured a deep yet paradoxical connection to the Western landscape, one which he shared with the Native cultures of the area who similarly valued yet mourned the treatment of the land. Still’s distinctive aesthetic, born from a fatalistic view of the natural, visually coalesces both the arduous and severe circumstances of his upbringing and the unique cultural environment of the Northwest.

An only child, Clyfford Elmer Still was born in the tiny town of Grandin, North Dakota in 1904.\(^3\)\(^7\) The family soon moved to Spokane, Washington and then on to Bow Island, Alberta.\(^3\)\(^8\) Similar to the nineteenth century frontier expansion in the United States, the Canadian prairies were open to homesteading in 1909 when the Still family chose to claim a lot. Because the prairies became available to homesteaders long after the more well-known frontier expansion in the United States, a harsh pioneer way-of-life still


\(^{38}\) See note above.
existed in the region well into the twentieth century. The family faced the challenge of growing a profitable yield of crops while also breaking virgin soil, an enormously demanding task given the ruthlessness of the climate. Still, reminiscing about his upbringing, would recall that his arms would be “bloodied to the elbows shocking wheat” after a day’s labor. Still described the situation as “men and…machines ripped a meager living from the top soil”, making clear the bleakness of daily life. In addition to the hardships endured by the novice farmer, 1917 ushered in a drought period, which would have catastrophic effects on Alberta’s farming communities. The drought would last until 1926, where after one season of a profitable crop in 1928, the Depression collapsed the weakened agricultural economy. The devastation was phenomenal. The net income for farm operations for Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan was down to $363 million dollars in 1928, and only three years later in 1931, the income would flat line at $10.7 million in deficit. As Henry Hopkins, a museum director, would later say, “Still’s father was locked in mortal combat with the forces of nature…The battle was lost”.

41 Ibid.
42 See note above.
44 Ibid.
45 Dean Sobel and David Anfam, The Artist’s Museum, 67.
Needless to say, Still’s childhood growing up on the Albertan homestead was physically and psychologically demanding. The isolation and desperate circumstances of Still’s early life would certainly foster in him a pessimistic and rugged attitude. Particularly, Still seemed to carry a sort of resentment towards his father, saying once, “I had learned as a youth the price one pays for a father, a Yahweh, or his contemporary substitute…I must add the onlooker should bear in mind that the prodigal son has not returned to the father.” Moreover, evidence suggests Still was repeatedly beaten by his father. Though Still was perceptibly quiet about the circumstances of his origins, what the artist does mention exhibits a definite bitterness towards his father’s choice to homestead and the agrarian way-of-life, a psychological scar of extreme poverty. Still would often portray his father in a stern yet melancholic manner, as in the portrait the artist made of him in 1924 when Still was just twenty (Figure 1, PD-1 1924). Here, Elmer Still pensively, or even, despondently rests his chin in his hand, lit by the gentle flicker of a fire from below. The work is shadowy; the pen strokes make a busy, dark environment where his father’s lone figure resides in troubled thought. Not an endearing expression of familial bonding, this image of Still’s father portrays worry and grief, communicating both his father’s feelings of desperation and Still’s own perception of this deep sadness.

Still would later say, “Where I come from you don’t die for the status symbol or for the fancy Fifth Avenue parade”. This austere pessimism characteristic of Still

46 David Anfam, “‘Of the Earth, the Damned, and the Recreated’: Aspects of Clyfford Still’s Earlier Work,” Reading Abstract Expressionism, 581.
47 Dean Sobel and David Anfam, The Artist’s Museum, 80.
48 David Anfam, “‘Of the Earth, the Damned, and the Recreated’: Aspects of Clyfford Still's Earlier Work,” Reading Abstract Expressionism, 580.
throughout his life can be traced to his experience growing up in the unforgiving plains of Southern Canada. David Anfam, the premier scholar on Still, would write, “Existence had become marginal, an everyday hell...The paintings of the later 1920s and 1930s certainly embody a severe outlook.”50 The “severe outlook” which Anfam identifies in Still’s earlier paintings can be seen in the photographs and drawings, which predate the paintings of his young adulthood available to Anfam. The challenging circumstances of Still’s upbringing in addition to the isolation and vastness of his surroundings would both have a tremendous impact on his initial artistic development.

These early works reveal an intense interest in the artist’s immediate environment. Still would execute numerous sketches of the horses, farm equipment, grain silos, men working machines, and other scenes of daily life typical of the plains. These works contain a twofold sensibility; on one hand, a documentary, almost anthropological quality exists, and on the other, the early photographs and drawings done by Still are psychological. Early drawings, like PD-121 1923 (Figure 2) and PD-76 1923 (Figure 3), demonstrate the loose, spontaneous aesthetic Still performed in excess. PD-121, a study of various farm animals, exemplifies the artist’s detailed observations of his surroundings. The cows, ducks, and chickens are done with remarkable anatomical accuracy yet aesthetic fluidity. In more complete works, like PD-76, the same “quick” hand is used to describe a farm on the horizon. Just one of hundreds of drawings like this one, PD-76 captures a mood. The farmhouse, placed in the top register of the composition, suggests its isolation by the intentional bareness of the foreground. The vastness of the land is highlighted in this sparse composition. These drawings exemplify

50 See note 46.
an interest in portraying the unique characteristics of Still’s Canadian prairie while also representing the dark struggle between man, machine, and nature.

A similar “documentary” approach can be seen in Still’s early photographs. One photo depicts his father plowing a field on a tractor (Figure 4). The blurriness and off-kilter axis of the image suggests the photo was taken freely amid the action, not posed or particularly manipulated by the artist. The freshly tilled soil in the foreground and the dominating silhouette of Elmer Still on the tractor speak to Still’s effort to document how man and machine attempted to dominate the landscape through agriculture. This can likewise be seen in a photograph of harvesting equipment on the horizon of a field of wheat (Figure 5). Like PD-76, the machinery is dwarfed by the stretches of wheat and sky, which eclipse the background and foreground. The harvested wheat in a mound on the right side of the picture alludes to the machines’ process. A reckoning of forces appears present in this photo. The expanse of sky and wheat renders the harvesting equipment impotent to the vastness of the landscape, yet the scar left by the machines remains evident as a mound of harvested wheat in the photo. Another more dramatic photograph depicts a plow silhouetted against the sky (Figure 6). The plow seems almost vilified with the theatrical contrast in light, rendering it a dark mechanical actor against a bright sky. Though Still is in some ways merely documenting his immediate surroundings, the content and composition of these photographs suggests the artist views the agricultural activity of the region to be a relentless, futile struggle, a sentiment perhaps derivative of his relationship with his father.

Part of Still’s urge to record his environment was his interest in portraiture, a fascination which would follow him for decades as an artist. A natural talent of Still’s, his
earliest portraits were of his parents and family in addition to various neighbors on Bow Island. One example is his portrait of a local woman, PD-34 1923 (Figure 7). Still once again employs a loose sketching aesthetic, capturing the intense yet feminine features of his subject. The lightness and swiftness of the pencil is likely due to the artist’s rush to complete the portrait, assumedly drawn from life. Attention is given to representing the personality of his subject in a somewhat anthropological way, recording the exuberance of a local personality. Still truly attempts to capture and understand all aspects of his rural community, cataloguing the landscape, architecture, community members, flora, and fauna alike.

Like separate little thoughts, the sentiments of these early drawings and photographs culminated into more complete works, like PH-270 (1925, Figure 8). Here, a woman in a yellow dress, central in the composition, is rendered microscopic by the massive pastel sky. The horses, captured in motion, congregate around a meager patch of grass while the chickens scratch for feed in the dirt. The scene is pastoral yet lonesome. The woman occupies the center of the work precisely where the horizon and the sky touch, yet she is alone. The field seems to continue for miles behind her, diminishing her presence to merely a small yellow and red figure in an endless landscape, outnumbered even by animals. The attention to the horizon, especially the appearance of an endless stretch of land, conveys the sense of isolation in such an immense natural environment. The loneliness of the figure attending to her farm work juxtaposed the gradient blue of the sky behind her expresses a sense of futility in agricultural endeavors, farmers forever slaves to the untamable expanses of nature. Completed when Still was only sixteen, a similar technique is used in the very early painting, PH-274 1920 (Figure 9). The three
cows stand awkwardly and forlornly in the snowy main street of a tiny rural town. The sun casts a gentle pastel light across the frozen terrain, and where the street ends, only more snowy white land spreads for miles into oblivion. An impossibly small remnant of civilization clinging to the expansive prairie, this desolate main street appears bizarre in such an unforgiving climate. The cattle dominate the foreground, suggesting the inhabitants of this tiny town owe their livelihood to agriculture. Like PH-270, the strangeness of human life in so inhospitable a climate is made obvious, reflecting Still’s own feelings towards his early experiences growing up on Bow Island.

As a young man, Still develops a loose yet realistic method of documenting his surroundings, carefully studying how the people around him interact with and attempt to transform the vast and forbidding landscape. An avid drawer, Still toys with composition and the juxtaposition of subject matter in his early works to present an atmosphere. These experiments are characterized by Still’s interest in portraiture, landscapes, and detailed studies. The incredible attention to color, light, and form in these drawings and photographs demonstrates the artist’s early attempts to visually communicate an emotion, namely his dissatisfaction with the enterprise of farming, a pursuit chosen by his father. Still’s stylistic approach, developed in his very early years as a young artist, would lay the foundation for future experiments. A master of conveying visual and emotional drama later in life, these early works demonstrate Still’s preliminary attempts to present the loneliness and futility of farm life in the Canadian Dust Bowl.

While scholars have not yet addressed any of the works featured in this chapter, David Anfam has meticulously researched much of Still’s early life. Specifically, Anfam focuses on how Still, starting from this realistic style, reaches abstraction by the mid-
1940s; this will be examined in detail in the next chapter. The connection between the drawings of this chapter and the works made during the artist’s time on the Colville Reservation are best understood in light of Anfam’s previous scholarship.
Figure 1, Clyfford Still, Portrait of the Artist's Father, (PD-1) 1924. Pen and ink on paper, 7 1/2 x 6 1/8 in. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 2, Clyfford Still, PD-121, c. 1923. Graphite on paper, 8 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 3, Clyfford Still, PD-76, 1923. Graphite on paper, 5 3/4 x 8 7/8 in. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 4, Elmer Still on a Tractor
Photograph of Still's father, c. 1930. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum Archives

Figure 5, Harvesting equipment in the field
Photograph by Clyfford Still, c. 1930. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum Archives
Figure 6, silhouette of a plow
Photograph by Clyfford Still, c. 1930. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum Archives
Figure 7, Clyfford Still, PD-34, 1923. Graphite on paper, 8 7/8 x 5 3/8 in. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 8, Clyfford Still, PH-270, 1925. Oil on canvas, 17 1/2 x 15 1/2 in. Photo: Gary Regester © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 9, Clyfford Still, PH-274, 1920. Oil on canvas, 14 x 9 3/4 in. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Chapter 2: Paintings Leading to Abstraction, 1925-1945

Given that Still’s formative years as a teenager and young adult (1920-1925) have not been addressed by scholars due to the unavailability of materials, it is difficult to provide a more diverse perspective on the photographs and drawings discussed in Chapter 1. However, David Anfam, premier art historian on Clyfford Still, has given extensive study to Still’s early work created during the late 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. Anfam’s work has been primarily undisputed in academia and provides a rich context for understanding Still’s work of that time period. Yet, because the entirety of the Still oeuvre has remained hidden from the public for so long, Anfam’s overview of Still’s early work remains incomplete. Clyfford Still’s time spent on the Colville Reservation in 1936 in Nespelem, Washington was not only pertinent to the artist’s identity as Westerner, it also served as a foundational root from which the crucial paintings leading to abstraction derived. The artist’s cross-cultural exposure on the reservation only augments Anfam’s perspective on Still’s development of the abstract in the 1930s and early 1940s, rather than serving as an antithesis to the historian’s central opinion.\(^51\)

Anfam identifies several sources of both philosophical and visual inspiration in Still’s work, championing the artists as a well-read and astute individual.\(^52\) In addition to paralleling Still’s aesthetics with many preceding canonical European artists, such as Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Courbet, Anfam focuses on a historical and philosophical


framework for understanding Still’s early paintings.\textsuperscript{53} In particular, Still is known for combining what Anfam terms, “a canny amalgam of disparate cultural crosscurrents, high and low….”\textsuperscript{54} European art historical, local, and personal influences blend into a characteristic yet fluid style for Still during these formative years. Though Anfam goes into great detail about the many European masters Still endeavored to emulate or understand, what is more significant, and also less critically addressed, are the local and personal interests Still held, which impacted his artistic practice. Tracing Still’s artistic maturity decade by decade, Anfam identifies many sources of influence derived specifically from American art historical and cultural currents.

Beginning with Still’s earliest available work, Anfam categorizes Still’s works from the late 1920s and into the 1930s as part of the Regionalist tradition, an offshoot of American Scene Painting.\textsuperscript{55} The Euro-American tensions brought on by the advent of World War I had many American artists seeking to emancipate themselves from the European aesthetic hegemony.\textsuperscript{56} Many artists turned, thus, to their hometowns, streets, and rural farms, attempting to foster a truly homegrown stylistic movement by capturing the uniqueness of the everyday American life.\textsuperscript{57} Described by one scholar, Regionalism

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 80.
flourished when “a generation of artists struggled to find a form and content for their art that would match their own experiences of America.” 58 Such artists that exemplify this trend are Thomas Hart Benton or Grant Wood of the famous, *American Gothic* (1930). 59 Still shared this desire to capture the essence of the American experience in his early works. David Anfam writes, “That Still would have tackled Regionalism was inevitable given his locale.” 60 In light of the concurrent proliferation of Regionalism throughout the country, the artist’s isolated environment seems like a foreseeable early subject matter, documenting the unique qualities of the American landscape. Consequently, Still’s early drawings and photographs, seen in Chapter 1, parallel the Regionalist attitude. One scholar describes the movement’s ideological foundation as “an integration of contemporary art and popular culture which addressed physical and spiritual regeneration in the modern world.” 61 Inherent to this quest for “spiritual regeneration” is the fear of technology overshadowing an ethical understanding of the natural world, a sentiment shared by Still due to his experiences homesteading virgin soil. Still would feel the ideological influence of Regionalism long after the movement’s eventual demise. Even as late as 1940, the artist would call his work “an outgrowth of reaction to organic and

mechanical forms of the environment”, recalling the agrarian way-of-life in Alberta.  

The artist’s awareness of the local or regional can be seen in the paintings from the early 1930s; what is human and what is mechanical collide in these early works in a manner informed by Still’s childhood memories. *PH-619* 1930 (Figure 1) exemplifies Still’s interest in the man-machine struggle. Typical of the Regionalist tendency, Still has chosen a train track snow plow as his subject, a type of machinery unique to the Albertan prairies where grain is shipped via railway. The ominous plow, like an immense metal claw, dwarfs the figure’s stature, despite his location in the conductor’s area. What separates this image from more epitomic works of Regionalism is its sculpted surface and claustrophobic composition, emphasizing the fearsome stature of the machine compared to the fragile human frame. Anfam describes *PH-619* as “the compacted masses…blocking any exit from the congeries…”  

Indeed, though the Regionalist sensibility exists in content, Still unusually transforms a scene from his everyday life into a crowded and uncomfortable vision. The heavily sculpted paint on the canvas, a prelude to his later technique, further adds to the sense of impenetrability of the picture plane.  

Yet, above all, is the tension between the figure and the plow, vying for the viewer’s eye.  

One physical manifestation of the Regionalist trend was the proliferation of artists’ colonies. One scholar describes the phenomenon, “Art colonies blossomed across the country; their main goal, to capture the history and condition of the American

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62 See note 10.  
64 Ibid.
people.”  

Still was invited to attend an artists’ colony in Saratoga Springs, New York during the summer of 1934. Funded by the Trask Foundation, this retreat, affectionately known as Yaddo, continues to be an elite think-tank of writers and artists of all mediums. Working with critically acclaimed artists of the time, like Joseph Pollid, Still would write his time spent at Yaddo was “…the most potentially valuable summer I have spent yet.” Indeed, Still’s time at the Trask Foundation marks a distinctive shift in his work, what Anfam would call “…a turn towards the altogether more imaginative phase…”

This marked change would manifest itself in a series of many figure studies done on window shades completed when Still was at Yaddo. No longer attentive to realistic detail and coloring, Still manipulates the figure to create more emotionally charged scenes, like in PH-652 1934 (Figure 2). A composition Still would repeat in other works, PH-652 shows a nude male in profile, tall and erect against a muddied, dark background. Still disregards anatomically correct proportions; the painfully swollen hands of the figure are accentuated with red, suggesting they are bloodied by intense manual labor. The man’s emaciated form appears famished and deprived, yet he strides in the foreground as if he anticipates the burdensome toils. Despite the weightiness of the subject matter, there remains a confidence in the application of the paint to the surface

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid, 16.
69 David Anfam, “‘Of the Earth, the Damned, and the Recreated’: Aspects of Clyfford Still's Earlier Work,” Reading Abstract Expressionism, 582.
not seen in previous works. Gestural brushstrokes and unapologetic, wet application of color describe the features of the subject with minimal effort. Similarly, PH-643 (Figure 3) exemplifies the artist’s early attempts at family or couple compositions, which would become highly developed paintings in the later 1930s. Here, we see again the lanky male figure with the swollen bloodied hands, only this time, leaning over a well to presumably see if it’s dry. A pregnant woman in a yellow dress stands opposite, facelessly staring at the viewer. The colors are a sodden mix of pastels, dark neutrals, and startling primaries. Overall, this expressionistic style yields a solemn tone to the works, demonstrating a new emotional and technical boldness in the artist. Still blossoms during this time, moving away from the realistic drawings of the 1920s.

Still would once say, “The figure stands behind it all.” 71 After the artist’s time spent at Yaddo, the figure became his primary focus. 72 What began as small oil scenes on window shades quickly developed into larger, masterful compositions on canvas. 73

The traces of Regionalism are remotely detected in these paintings from the mid-1930s if only through Still’s devotion to vaguely rural settings for his humanoid figures. The pastoral drawings of his youth mature into fully-fledged psychological renderings of human suffering after Still’s time in Saratoga Springs. Moreover, the artist’s experimentation with the anatomical proportions of the figure during his time at Yaddo becomes more fully realized in the paintings created after the summer of 1934. Similar traits can be seen between PH-643 (Figure 3), an oil on window shade completed in

73 Ibid, 62.
Saratoga Springs, and PH-448 1934 (Figure 4), a larger oil on canvas completed shortly afterwards. In both scenes, the male figure is portrayed with large, heavy hands outlined with a reddish hue, once again suggesting the bloody aftermath of manual labor. Both men are depicted on the left of the composition, absorbed in their respective preoccupations. Also in both works, the woman is shown in the right register of the canvas, gazing directly yet absently at the viewer. The enlarged hips and stomach of the women in each work imply age perhaps in PH-448 or pregnancy, which seems more fitting in PH-643. What differs between the two is the stunning shift in color palette, clarity of subject matter, and the heightened portrayal of emotion. In PH-448, the warm flesh tones of the figures contrasts vibrantly against the murky cool colors used for the background and the water. The loose brushwork and the quick, muddied colors of PH-643 become the careful and calculated brushstrokes of PH-448. More importantly, Still takes bigger risks in his manipulation of the figure in PH-448. The nude figures display their aged and swollen bodies, faces chiseled into masks bearing the physiognomy of a great emotional burden. Anfam writes on this work, “Are they a postlapsarian Adam and Eve? Or do they extemporize, with license, on the hardscrabble truths of hygiene in a filthy, poverty-stricken hole?” It remains unclear whether this pair references the family farm on Bow Island or a fantastic illustration of a mythic narrative. However, the ambiguity of background demonstrates a new freedom from the specificity of Regionalism. No longer beholden to the particularities of the Albertan plains, Still now explores the emotional and psychological associations of his early life without working literally from live scenery. Though the physical manifestations of the farm are not

74 Ibid, 79.
presented in PH-448, the psychological toil of surviving the Dust Bowl is inherent to the tone of the work. The dramatic contrast in color and frightful manipulation of the human form produce an overall dismal and weighty atmosphere.

The experimentation with figuration from the 1930s took other forms, like the family scene in PH-80 1935 (Figure 5). Like PH-448, all of the figures share the swollen, red-hued hands and chiseled mask-like sullen faces. Pushed up to the foreground, the figures each have unique facial features and clothing, though the expression of grief carved into their sullen faces remains unanimously articulated. The woman yellow dress recalls the yellow dresses depicted in PH-643, and even earlier on, PH-270 (Figure 8 from Chapter 1) – perhaps a favorite dress of his mother. The bodies in this family scene are ridden with starvation as the central man’s ribs protrude grotesquely from his abdomen. The definition of the ribs to demonstrate hunger or want is similarly used in PH-643 and PH-652, once again showing Still’s development of the figure from experimentations performed at Yaddo. The reference to Bow Island is, comparatively, more literal in this work. Behind the three men and seated female is the familiar presence of a wheat harvester from Still’s early drawings and photographs.

The enduring hardship and emotional toil of Still’s childhood is clear in the paintings from the 1930s. Most striking is perhaps another portrait Still did of his father in 1935, PH-257 (Figure 6). The characteristic attributes of the chiseled, elongated face and the standard overalls place this work definitively in the mid-1930s; however, a bizarre tension exists between the subject’s stern, burdened expression and the orange flower he holds in his left hand. Anfam remarks this work, “To discern a paternal vibe about the overweening brute portrayed in PH-257… is easy. Unexpected, though, is the
orange bloom that he wields, like the attribute to some recondite diety…” 75 Perhaps, the flower recalls the natural world Still’s father so determinedly attempted to master. Poignantly demonstrating the artist’s complex relationship with his father, the portrait suggests the psychological mark of the Dust Bowl remained determinedly fresh for Still, even into adulthood.

From the tortured figures of 1930s, Still advances at a rapid pace towards the iconic abstractions of his mid-career. With the development of the abstract, Still also began to cohere the mythical and spiritual framework for the iconic, jagged abstractions, a theme he would revisit throughout his career. Because Still worked tirelessly to promote an image of impenetrability, investigating Still’s early influences, chiefly those most esoteric, remains a guessing game for scholars. 76 Anfam understands the paintings of the late 1930s and early 1940s through an anthropological and literary lens. More specifically, Anfam regards Jane Harrison’s Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion as a key source for Still’s early ideation. 77 Published in 1912 and acquired by Washington State College in 1917, Themis discusses the origins of many Greek myths and their relevance to actual weather and crop patterns, blurring the distinction between spiritual-religious rhetoric and anthropological study. 78 Harrison was a protégé of Sir James Frazer, a prominent mythologist during Still’s time. 79

75 Ibid, 80.
79 David Anfam, “‘Of the Earth, the Damned, and the Recreated’: Aspects of Clyfford Still's Earlier Work,” Reading Abstract Expressionism, 584.
between Still’s work and Harrison’s book are undeniable, or at least, highly coincidental. The evidence Anfam uses to demonstrate the link between Harrison and Still is two-fold.

The few remaining titles of Still’s early work provide a rare insight into the artist’s perception of his own work. Attempting to remove any distraction from the visual experience of his paintings, Still methodically assigned each of his works a number, making old titles a rare source of information for scholars. One list of titles remains, however, from his first solo exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery in 1946. The unusual titles reference themes and exact phrasing from Harrison’s book. For example, Still named one canvas, Nemesis of Esther III. Harrison harkens the Biblical tale of Esther and Mordecai as a symbol of “the dying or dead vegetation of the old and the sprouting vegetation of the new year.” If Still were to consider Vashti and Haman (also from the Bible) as an equivalent symbolic couple, the denotation of the third in the title is appropriate, according to Anfam. The overarching connection is the process of the Earth’s regeneration- both spiritually and physically through the cyclic nature of the seasons, particularly as they pertain to agriculture. Another work, entitled Buried Sun, possibly refers to PH-447 1936 (Figure 7). Here, the pregnant belly of a strange primordial being eclipses the yellowy orb of a rising sun. A recurrent theme from Harrison’s Themis is the personification of the sun and its death at a solstice, generally assuming the narrative form of the Persephone legend.

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80 Ibid.
81 David Anfam, “‘Of the Earth, the Damned, and the Recreated’: Aspects of Clyfford Still's Earlier Work,” Reading Abstract Expressionism, 584.
82 Ibid, 585.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid, 584.
Other connections to the book can be seen in Still’s choice of subject matter in the early 1940s. Anfam identifies the thematic keywords in Themis as “‘myth’, ‘magic’, ‘totemism’, ‘the primitive’, ‘culture/nature’, and ‘spirits’”, ideas which were significant to many artists and thinkers of the early 1940s. These ideas seem to resonate for many of Still’s paintings preceding abstraction, like PH-297 1938 (Figure 8). Two totems animatedly act as landscape and central figure in this work; a singular “eye” of the central totem framing a section of the sky. The gestural brushwork of PH-297 heightens the feeling of a living landscape, an earth which is alive and sentient. The barbed wire, acting as a barrier between the subject and the viewer, alludes to the interference of mankind in this primeval landscape. Of the two places known to contain such odd geological formations, one exists only 50 miles south of the Bow Island homestead in Drumheller, Alberta, demonstrating the artist’s mythic associations of his homeland with Harrison’s text. PH-297 demonstrates the complexity of influences inherent to the works from the 1940s, combining both Still’s own experience of his native Northwest with the literary and anthropological ideas of myth.

What followed Still’s ideological basis in anthropological writings, like Themis, was a relentless push towards, and ultimately total embrace of, the abstract. Anfam describes the mid-1940s, “…somehow by around the time of the end of World War II (give or take a year either side), the tide has turned, never to flow back again.” Paintings of the late 1940s verge on, and often achieve, total abstraction, using quasi-

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86 Ibid, 32.
figural gestures as symbolic of myth as mediator between man and the natural world. Works like PH-350 1943 (Figure 9) epitomize this intermediary period. The interplay between foreground and background between the black and white recalls the movement of the totemic landscape in PH-297. The vertical brushstrokes, like colored smoke, draw the eye along the crisp, jagged threshold between black and white. Anfam denotes the verticality of this work as, “‘living forms springing from the ground’”, associating the forms with a natural, somewhat mystic, phenomenon.  

Well-entrenched in the connection between man, nature, and myth, the paintings of the early 1940s quickly develop into the iconic abstractions of the mid-1940s and early 1950s, a style which became characteristic of Still’s work until his death in 1980. For example, two canvases which have become emblematic of the artist’s career are PH-235 1944 (Figure 10) and PH-385 1949 (Figure 11). The quintessential PH-235 looms before the viewer like an inky shadow, a nightmarish cliff broken only by the red, yellow, green, and white chasms across the surface. The sense of verticality echoes the paintings preceding this work, like PH-350. Similarly, dark red and black strokes seem to tear through the vibrant red canvas in PH-385. Like a tortured landscape, the lively brushstrokes suggest movement, like an explosion caught in a photograph.

Though Anfam understands Still through multiple influences, both literary and artistic, the conceptual development of the artist’s distinctive abstractions he ascribes to Still’s interest in *Themis*. Anfam explains the artist’s connection with the book:

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88 Ibid, 36.
89 Ibid, 156.
90 Ibid, 172.
“…Harrison’s Themis revolve[s] around earth’s fertility and wasting as catalysts for myth and ritual, themselves deemed to be rudimentary types of artistic creativity. Not only might those topics have struck a special chord in anyone who had known Canada’s recent agricultural disasters; it would also have been logical to proceed from classical thought and literature to writings which sought to elucidate their genesis.” 91

Though Anfam understands Still’s visual language through comparison to European masters and other American artists at the time, the scholar attributes Still’s ideological development of the abstract as a mythic landscape or sublime clash between man and nature uniquely to the artist’s exposure to Themis. 92 The key leitmotifs of Harrison’s book certainly pertain to Still’s work. Yet on a deeper level, these themes explicate, in the artist’s mind, the hardships he encountered on Bow Island through Harrison’s mythical or anthropological rationalizations. 93 While it is undeniable Still was likely interested in Harrison’s Themis and the work of other artists who preceded him, Anfam fails to address in full Still’s unique experience of the Northwest during the mid-1930s. During his professorship at Washington State College (1935-1941), Still worked diligently to begin an artists’ colony on the Colville Indian Reservation in Nespelem, Washington. As verified by the recently available collection of drawings, Still’s cross-cultural encounter on the reservation proves to be of far greater influence than originally thought, augmenting the previous scholarship on the spiritual significance behind Still’s work.

91 David Anfam, “‘Of the Earth, the Damned, and the Recreated’: Aspects of Clyfford Still's Earlier Work,” Reading Abstract Expressionism, 584.
93 Ibid.
Figure 1, Clyfford Still, PH-619, 1930-31. Oil on canvas, 33 5/8 x 47 7/8 in. (85.4 x 121.5 cm) Photo: Jay Baker. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 2, Clyfford Still, PH-652, 1934. Oil on window shade, 10 3/4 x 7 3/8 in. (27.3 x 18.7 cm) Photo: Gary Regester. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 3, Clyfford Still, PH-643, 1934. Oil on window shade, 11 1/2 x 9 1/4 in. (29.2 x 23.5 cm) Photo: Gary Regester. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 4, Clyfford Still, PH-448, 1934-35. Oil on canvas, 54 3/8 x 35 5/8 in. (137.9 x 90.5 cm) Photo: Jay Baker. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum (c) Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 5, Clyfford Still, PH-80, 1935. Oil on canvas, 48 1/4 x 59 7/8 in. (122.6 x 152.1 cm) Photo: Jay Baker. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 6, Clyfford Still, PH-257, 1935. Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 24 in. (74.9 x 61 cm)
Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 7, Clyfford Still, PH-447, 1936. Oil on canvas, 48 1/2 x 35 in. (123.2 x 88.9 cm) Photo: Gary Regester. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 8, Clyfford Still, PH-297, 1938. Oil on canvas, 33 7/8 x 25 1/8 in. (86 x 63.8 cm). Photo: Peter Harholdt. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 9, Clyfford Still, PH-350, 1943. Oil on canvas, 59 ½ x 38 in. (151.3 x 96.5 cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 10, Clyfford Still, PH-235, 1944. Oil on canvas, 105 x 92 1/2 in. (266.7 x 235 cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 11, Clyfford Still, PH-385, 1949. Oil on canvas, 105 ½ x 81 in. (268 x 205.7 cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Chapter 3: Clyfford Still at the Colville Reservation in Nespelem, WA, 1936

The summer of 1936, Clyfford Still made numerous drawings, including portraits, landscapes, and studies, which documented life on the Colville Reservation. Similar in style and content to the drawings and photographs of his youth, the artist reverts back to an older aesthetic to anthropologically record his experiences. Still’s sympathetic reckoning with the Native people on the reservation, specifically the Yakima and Sahaptian-speaking tribes, would solidify the spiritual-mythical grounding for his work, a vision which the artist conveyed through decades of his paintings. Anfam attributes Still’s shift to psychological figuration in the 1930s to his time spent at Yaddo and the mythological background of his work from the 1940s to his connection to Jane Harrison’s *Themis*. Though these sources certainly play a role in Still’s work, the deep emotional scar left from years of hard manual labor, recognized by Still in people of the Colville Reservation, supplements another means, one rooted in the physical experiences, by which to understand the fundamental ideological and spiritual framework for his characteristic paintings.

Eighteen miles north of the immense Coulee Dam lies the Colville Reservation in Nespelem, Washington, home to numerous indigenous Northwestern peoples.⁹⁴ Located along the Columbia River, this segment of land is primarily composed of dry plains-like plateaus.⁹⁵ The notion of reservation life was originally negotiated amongst the tribes in the 1855 tribal council. Established in 1872, the land where the modern reservation now

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sits was originally home to the Nespelems, San Poils, the Lakes, the Okanogans, and the Colvilles. Numerous tribes, different both culturally and linguistically, were assigned to the reservation over a period of several years in the late 19th century after a series of treaties and Presidential Executive Orders. The final boundary of the reservation would be fixed with the Reservation Allotment Act of 1887. The two main linguistic groups of the reservation are Salish and Shahaptian. Many tribes did not originally agree to the stipulations of the original 1855 negotiation, which designated the initial boundaries of the reservation. Other groups who traditionally maintained a nomadic plains lifestyle would later be forced to occupy parts of the reservation, much to the displeasure of the current occupants who remained loyal to old tribal rivalries and their ancestral homelands. These nomadic tribes include the Columbias, the Yakimas, and the Nez Perce who in 1885, after many years of conflict and an unsuccessful attempt to flee to Canada during the Nez Perce War of 1877, were required to forgo their traditional transiency and accept the confines of the reservation.

Once the Nez Perce joined the many tribes, the reservation was essentially saturated and its boundaries, nonnegotiable. The subsequent period from 1875 to 1925 was dedicated to Native assimilation into mainstream American culture, facilitated by the

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97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
100 M Gidley, With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century, 34.
101 Ibid, 40.
Because many tribes could no longer sustain themselves by traditional means, like hunting buffalo and gathering wild plants, many became wards of the state, dependent on the government, namely the Bureau of Indian Affairs, for farming supplies, sawmills, black smithies, and other necessities required for permanent settlement. Many of the tribes were novice to the practice of cultivating the land and relied on government rations for basic nourishment. Often, the rations were late, spoiled, or non-existent, causing widespread malnutrition. This was particularly true for the more nomadic tribes, like the Nez Perce. Because their survival depended so greatly on government aid, food and supplies, necessities were on occasion withheld to coerce people into a particular course of action. For example, in 1901, Chief Joseph and his people of the Nez Perce were denied their beef rations because they refused to send their children to boarding school where they would be forced to relinquish their cultural roots.

It was after this period of assimilation, in 1936, when Clyfford Still and Worth Griffin first set out to determine the area’s viability as an artists’ colony for the State College of Washington where Still was a professor and Worth Griffin was the chair of the art department. Griffin, a lifelong enthusiast of Native portrait painting, first visited the reservation with Still after the artists’ summers at Yaddo in 1934 and 1935. The two professors spent about a week in Nespelem where the Coville Reservation is located and

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102 Ibid, 42.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
107 Ibid, 12.
returned to Pullman, eager to begin taking students to experience the Native culture. Still, in particular, took on the task of convincing the Dean of the School of Music and Fine Arts to finance the endeavor, claiming the area contained “an abundance of valuable and colorful material”.

Though Still would not return to the colony after the summer of 1936, his efforts to begin the program were duly recognized by Worth Griffin and his students, who returned every summer to Nespelem until 1941.

Though Still did not remain on the reservation for more than a week, his extensive journaling and drawings done during that time and when he returned indicate the artist’s intense interest in his subject matter. The Nespelem works demonstrate a return to the anthropological and realistic aesthetics of the drawings from Still’s early life on Bow Island (circa 1920-1925). Again, Still returns to portraiture, working with Worth Griffin to document the various residents in Nespelem. Beyond the artists’ own personal interest in realistic portraiture, Worth and Still’s initial contact with the locals was the first of its kind. Never before had the residents of the Colville Reservation sat for a live portrait, and similarly, anthropological interest in the area had only begun a few years before Still’s visit. In a sense, the portraits completed served as a living history. Indeed, all of the portraits made by Worth Griffin from that time instantly became property of Washington State College as part of their historic records.

Before delving into the complexities of the Native belief system and how it relates to Still’s work, it is important to identify the people Still encountered on the reservation as documented through various portraits. These portraits that Still created during his

108 Ibid, 16.
109 Ibid, 11.
110 Ibid, 13.
111 Ibid.
week-long sojourn speak to what was likely a rich cultural experience. His drawings include many first generation descendants of influential 19th century chiefs.

One individual he drew on multiple occasions was Cleveland Kamiakan, the youngest of four sons of the great Yakima chief, Kamiakan.112 Born in 1800 on Ahtanum Creek, Kamiakin, Cleveland’s father, was a natural leader among the Plateau tribes.113 Historians Trafzer and Scheuerman remarked once that Kamiakin was “blessed…with considerable spiritual strength”, a trait that earned him respect among his peers during times of great spiritual and political crises.114 Kamiakin was most known for his involvement in the Yakima Wars, which began with the Plateau tribal council in 1855.115 The Yakima tribe’s agreement was a deciding factor to insure the success of the government-sanctioned reservations decided at that council.116 Shortly after the treaty was signed, however, many white settlers began to homestead on the agreed Yakima reservation. Kamiakin and his tribe decided to take action, and thus, began the Yakima Wars, which ended in 1858 with the Yakima defeat. The Yakima retreated to Canada, only to return back to the United States a few years later. Kamiakin lived out the rest of his days at Rock Lake, where his son Cleveland was born.117 Though his son did not see the bloody battles of the mid-nineteenth century, many say Cleveland Kamiakin held similar personal and spiritual beliefs as his father, namely a steadfast belief in peace and seclusion for his people and an adherence to traditional customs.118

112 Ibid, 53.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid, 54.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid, 57.
118 Ibid, 54.
Still did many portraits of Cleveland Kamiakin while on the reservation, though it was “common knowledge that Cleveland harbored a dislike for the white man in general”. The portraits range in expressivity; however, Still’s interpretation of the sitter’s persona shines in these pencil sketches. The first of these is PD-77 1936 (Figure 1). A stoic visage, done in three quarter view, the sketch shows the signs of age in his heavy wrinkles. Still identifies his sitter with a note at the bottom, which reads “Cleveland- son of Kamiakan- 6/23/36”. PD-77 is a very accurate likeness to the sitter; the nuances of the artist’s impression of Cleveland are subtle. In full headdress, Cleveland appears otherworldly, gazing into the distance as if he has seen terrible events. Still plays with the negative space along the contours of the face, equating it in this case to light hitting the more pronounced areas. The quickness and lightness of the hand seen in earlier portraits from his teenage years appears again almost twenty years later; this time, to intimately document a forgotten culture.

Another portrait of Cleveland, PD-53 1936 (Figure 2), offers a more revealing glimpse of the artist’s relationship with his sitter. Here, Cleveland Kamiakin appears in anguish, perhaps enjoying the last of his cigarette. The gestural lines to describe his shoulder and facial features are exceptionally descriptive, indicating an aged weariness. There exists a humanity to the portrait, a kind of sympathy towards the subject. More importantly, Still takes more liberties to present a “truth” about his subject rather than detailing Cleveland’s unique facial features. The drawing is somewhat of an abstraction as it presents a subjective version of an individual – a suffering and burdened remnant from a forgotten legacy.

119 Ibid, 58.
Furthermore, Still’s interest in Cleveland can be seen, not only in the volume of
drawings where Cleveland is the subject, but also through the development of the detail.
PD-54 1936 (Figure 3) is similar in style and content to PD-77 (Figure 1). Both portraits
focus on a realistic portrayal of Cleveland Kamiakin’s unique facial features, depicting
him stoically gazing into the distance. However, the gestural marks of PD-77 become
tighter and more descriptive in PD-54. The lines of the face become more precise, and a
more subdued realistic effect is achieved, compared to the emotive PD-53. Beyond pencil
sketches, these portraits culminate into a more comprehensive work done in pastels, PP-
241 1936 (Figure 4). Perhaps completed in the months or weeks after his sojourn at the
reservation, PP-241 is vibrant, exemplifying Still’s close attention to color, light, and
gestural mark making. The layers of pastels suggest a great amount of effort was spent to
achieve a particular atmosphere, one of majesty and ethereality. Still would make very
detailed notes recording the unique colors of the traditional dress of the Natives in several
drawings he created at Nespelem. PP-241 is, thus, a result of extensive visual studying
through portraiture and note-taking.

Another key member of the Colville Reservation community was Mary Owhi, one
of the wives of the great Columbia chief, Moses. Mary Owhi was sister to Chief
Moses’ primary wife, Quemollah. Both women were daughters of the famous Yakima
leader, Owhi, who was an influential chief of a segment of the Yakima tribe and present
at the 1855 council. He was also the father of Qualchin, who was Kamiakin’s cousin

120 M Gidley, *With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the
Century*, 65.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
by marriage. Quemollah and Mary’s marriage to Chief Moses was likely a political move to alliance the Yakima and Columbia tribes.

At the time of his visit, Mary Owhi would have been 118 years old; she died the next year. Due to her incredible age, Owhi likely appeared to be a mythic figure to Griffin and Still. During his time on the reservation, Still kept a diary of his time there. Because of Still’s thoroughly edited the autobiographical materials of his estate, the diary is likely only a fragmented glimpse into the artist’s experience. Despite this, a great deal of the diary is dedicated to Still’s interaction with Mary Owhi. Still’s cluttered handwriting often muddles the spelling of some words, making parts of the passage disjointed and unclear. Some words are misspelled, and some sentences are missing key words. Considering these discrepancies, the passage reads best as follows:

“In the afternoon out several miles south in the desolate basalt canyons to see the oldest person on the reservation. A ruined farm plus an old flimsy shack in a nook of a great valley. And out of the bushes hobbled the weirdest little old crone I’ve ever seen. Left eye shut and blind -- right eye a bleary streak -- both eye lids of both eyes an area of flat smeary blue black. The face pecabaily flat, but a prominent hook to the nose. Head and cheeks squawish, lips pendant, hair gray and small braids pulled to front where she pulled and picked at them with twisted black hands. Frequently she would rub her forehead and eyes and cheeks with the palms of those clumsy hands as though brushing away and the wrinkles would show as white and brown streaks and the eyelids would be pulled into strange places so that the face would become a grotesque mask. Slightly deaf but several

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124 M Gidley, *With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century*, 65.


teeth left. Very stooped and bent leaning on a cane. Our interpreter, her great
grandnephew had difficulty in making our desire known to her but she acceded
when she understood. So we go out to do her Monday morning. As we were about
to leave she became aware that there were two of us!

...Monday and out south toward Mason City about 9 miles th... Evant up some
brutal valleys toward Lake Ammena about three miles to a ruined shacke --the
home Princess Qubi. A great granddaughter met us -- an educated but reticent girl
who had worked out a $5.00 fee with her hubby for the use of the old lady of 118.
We stalled around thinking all hopeless when she got down to $2.50 which we
decided to give. We painted her in the most unusual front room. The ceiling soiled
black tar paper much soaked and patched. The walls tan packing paper, cleaner
but here and there covered with a bright purple stain (the effect was of insufficient
paint to go around the room). Floor old shiplap boards; windows made up of
fragmenting or inadequate panes of glass. But in this shack, about to collapse of
its own weight and weathering, was a modern walnut bed and dressing table with
a large circular glass, and green silk vanity seat! A rich silk lavender bed spread
covered the bed; a silver dressing set reposed on the table!

We put the old lady in the light of the doorway where she stiffly posed and
sweat like a Trojan in sum... petticoats and a red flannel dress heavily beaded.
She looked not even ugly in her heat cloths. Not speaking English she gave
however, an exciting and gestural account of a buffalo stampede over a camp
during her early childhood days in Montana some 104 or 6 years ago. She and the
rest escaped to timber but their was wiped out. He mind worked slowly but with
amazing awareness. By no means senile or maudlin but quite alert and shapely
in.......

Her lady was almost wasted away. She walked with support of a stick but
her back would not support her long bending ‘til the spinal column was as high as
the head in a little time. She whole figure was very small and thin. If one eye (her
left) had not been blind and shut in.

We drove on up to Lake Ammena (a Terville road) swam and came back
to town.

Re. above: Mary Owhi -Yakima Tuiles age 118 yrs, Born weesas pass
(near Yakima) daughter chief Owhi, Wife of chief Moses of Moses tribe to whom
Colville reservation passed.
Above oldest person on Colville R. 57 yrs old when she came to It from
Yakima.”127

Though garbled, the passage clarifies aspects of Still’s experience. He begins by noting

Mary Owhi’s home is several miles away from town, and then, continues with a

127 Passage from Clyfford Still's journal, June, 1936. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still
Museum Archives.
description of the woman’s features. His account both grotesque, and even exotic, Still describes Owhi almost as an exceptional specimen from the past. Still lists her features like a pseudo-anthropological, pseudo-mythical stream-of-consciousness. Owhi sounds like a grotesque yet magical witch from a fairy tale or a primordial remnant of a forgotten tribe. He calls her “the weirdest little old crone I’ve ever seen”, like a character from a fable. In this way, Still understands Owhi as an “Other” separate from his own culture and perspective. This notion of the “Other” will be discussed more in-depth in Chapter 4; however, it is important to note here that Still, though sympathetic towards his subjects, sees them as exotic, unknown, and distant from himself.

Though the old woman’s features repulse Still slightly, there must also exist an unfamiliar attraction as the artist made detailed studies of Owhi in PDX-15 1936 (Figure 5). The “X” in the title indicates the work was not officially documented by Still in his archives, and the packet from which this particular drawing is taken was found hidden in an old filing cabinet during the Clyfford Still Museum’s acquisition of his estate. The particular packet aforementioned was wrapped in tissue paper and labeled, “Sketches of Indians, WSC summer art colony at Nespelem, WA where Still taught”; this packet included many works done on Washington State College letterhead. The significance of this will also be discussed at a later point, but what is interesting about PDX-15 are the very thorough notes and studies of her garments and body. Occupying the top register of the drawing are Owhi’s moccasins peeking from beneath the hem of her dress. The feet are squat and gnarled yet delicate, showing age and fatigue. Beneath the feet are several studies of Owhi’s “twisted”, “black”, and “clumsy” hands. At the bottom right, we see a

128 Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum Collections and Archives
small portrait of the old woman. Still takes time to include her braids, which he notes in
the entry, as well as the “hook nose” and her shut and blind left eye. Finally, beside that
is a beaded purse, whose design is carefully rendered. Next to it, a note which best reads
“lavender edge, black red tan… bead strings,… red fringe”. The distinct colors, shapes,
and textures are all carefully and tediously recorded – even repeatedly drawing the old
woman’s hands and feet. Like the detailed studies of his youth, Still meticulously
observes his subject matter, documenting systematically his experience of this woman.
This drawing reveals an intense fascination with OwHi that is consistent with the type of
description relayed in Still’s diary. This consistency between the written notes and the
studies illuminates how Still’s drawings were an extension of observation similar to the
artist’s drawings circa 1920.

Still’s description of how they arranged the portraiture session is equally telling of
the artists’ relationship to their subjects. Griffin and Still haggled with the granddaughter
of OwHi and her grandson-in-law over the price to draw the grandmother. This reveals
that the sitters did not work voluntarily, and perhaps, felt ambiguous towards or even
resentful of the artists. Thus, it remained entirely Still and Griffin’s prerogative to arrange
these portrait sessions, which by the tone of the diary entry, seem loosely organized by
the historical or social significance of the sitter. The exchange was, thus, one-sided; the
artists traveled to learn about and record the living culture of the Native people on the
reservation regardless of the opinion of their sitters.

Equally as significant is Still’s sensitivity to the old woman’s living conditions as
he describes them in the second paragraph of the passage. The artist seems to be
assessing the woman’s quality of life as displayed by the level of wealth, “The ceiling
soiled black tar paper much soiled and patched.” Despite the squalid surroundings, Still notices the old woman’s elegant furniture. This need to discern the level of poverty of the old woman perhaps comes from Still’s own preconceived notions of how Natives live, namely in squalor. The artist compares how he thinks most Natives live to what he actually perceives. However, on another level, Still must recognize certain aspects of his childhood in the old woman’s remote shack, the isolation as well as the relative level of poverty. Still even takes the time to carefully draw Owhi’s residence in PD-100 1936 (Figure 6). Here, a dilapidated wooden shack sits nestled beneath a craggy foothill. Still writes on the bottom, “Home of C. OWHI’s daughter- Mary Moses 6/21/36 Nespelem 9 Mi SE”. This note is consistent with his diary in both the description of his journey to Owhi’s home and the ramshackle state of the structure. Still notes that Mary Owhi Moses was Owhi’s daughter rather than focusing on her marital ties to Chief Moses of the Columbias, his understanding of Mary’s significance more in line with Yakima cultural history. Still’s exposure to Yakima culture manifests itself in other sections of his diary and will be discussed in depth later in this chapter. However, what is important to note is how PD-100 possesses highly similar qualities to Still’s early drawings from the 1920s. Still replicates the same realistic style while also conveying a subjective atmosphere. In a Cézanne-esque fashion (and Still completed a Master’s thesis on the artist only a year before in 1935), the rickety boards, which compose the roof of this shack, mimic the rugged lines describing the mountain. There is a sense of rustic isolation, a poetic yet tragic depiction of a landscape. This image can be easily compared to PD-76 1923 (Figure 3 from Chapter 1). Again, the landscape and sky confront human habitation although, unlike the desolate farmhouses on the Albertan prairie in PH-76, Mary Owhi’s
home seems unified or encompassed by the surroundings. A romanticized vision of
Native life, Still depicts Mary Owhi as living, with simple means, as one with the earth.

Still continues in his journal to describe the actual portraiture session with Mary
Owhi. Becoming more familiar with the old woman, the artist expresses a warmhearted
appreciation for her age. He mentions Mary Owhi wearing a heavy red flannel dress for
the session and animatedly recalling a buffalo stampede, which Still labels “exciting”,
from her early childhood over 100 years past. Still then admires the decrepit body of
Mary, particularly how her back is hunched higher than the top of her head. The artist
seems impressed by the vulnerability that comes with such age as well as Owhi’s
surprisingly sharp intellect. Still describes Mary Owhi’s mind as “working slowly but
with amazing awareness” after hearing the story of the buffalo stampede. Overall, Still
seems surprised, and even delighted, by Owhi, like a vision from the past.

This appreciation of Mary Owhi’s aged sprightliness can be seen in Still’s portrait
of the woman, PD-55 1936 (Figure 7). The “prominent hook to nose” Still mentions in
his diary is seen here in full profile. This wonderful portrait includes many of the details
regaled by Still in his writings: the long braids, twisted black hands, the shut and blind
left eye. Still makes a note at the bottom, which reads “Mary Owhi, 118 years, Yakima
Tribe, Nespelem, 6/23/36”, noting once again Mary Owhi’s tribal affiliation as Yakima
rather than Columbia like her husband. A light from the left graces the many wrinkles of
Mary Owhi’s face. Her expression is calm and resolute, tolerant and knowing. Still
purposefully goes out of his way to include many grotesque features of the old woman,
like her knobby hand and the profile view featuring her left eye. These additions heighten
the sitter’s appearance of age while also garnering a sense of weathered wisdom. The
artist juxtaposes the elegant light falling on the tenacious visage of his subject with the dark and gnarled details of her body. The overall effect renders Mary Owhi a tragic yet courageous figure, wise and aged despite the many years of hard living. Many of Still’s portraits, including Owhi and Kamiakin, demonstrate the artist was uniquely in contact with Sahaptian-speaking tribes, specifically the Yakima.

Upon examining and comparing Still’s writings and drawings of Mary Owhi, it becomes clear both his intention to learn from and document the Native people of Nespelem as well as his requisite desire to revert back to a “juvenile” realistic aesthetic in order to achieve a greater understanding of his subject matter. Mary Owhi’s and Cleveland Kamiakin’s portraits can easily be compared to portraits from the 1920s, like PD-34 1923 (Figure 7 in Chapter 1). The sitters are all described using the same gestural pencil work; each individual is subjectively portrayed having both unique facial expressions in addition to characteristic personalities, as interpreted by the artist.

Likewise, Still returned to other artistic comportments characteristic of the 1920s. For instance, one photograph was taken of teepees on the Nespelem reservation (Figure 8). The photographs from the late 1920s (Figures 4, 5 and 6 of Chapter 1) record scenes from farm life in Alberta, and similarly, Still photographs the teepees nestled into the plateaus of Washington. This image of the teepees is likely the only photograph of its kind taken after the initial pictures of the 1920s by Still. The photograph’s origins can be inferred upon a closer examination of other sources from that time. First, Still mentions in his diary driving in and around the reservation; this is confirmed in the photo by the numerous cars near the teepees.\textsuperscript{129} Also, Still did a number of drawings on the Colville

\textsuperscript{129} Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum Collections and Archives
Reservation, which includes numerous studies of teepees similar to those in the photograph. PDX-3 1936 (Figure 9) and PDX-4 1936 (Figure 10), two drawings made for certain that summer, tenuously place and date the photograph to Still’s time at Nespelem. The photograph and the drawings are very similar. In PDX-3, three teepees are lined in a row, the angle of perspective allowing the forms to overlap. The perspective is similar in the photograph, and the teepees even align in a nearly identical manner. Seen in the background of PDX-3 is a teepee-like structure similar to the one seen in the right register of the photograph. This structure is drawn more in-detail in PDX-4. Unlike PDX-3, PDX-4 is placed in a mountainous setting similar to the photograph, where a distant barren mountain is seen on the left. Comparing the three images, the photograph’s origin seems undeniable, further demonstrating Still’s complete return to earlier artistic practices.

Why this return to a juvenile method of artistic production? Why not create more of the psychological works that Still had been creating up until this point? On one hand, Still was there as part of a university project. Perhaps, the situation solicited a more realistic type of visual documentation, a style which was already familiar to Still and which the artist employed easily. However, it is important to note that the portraits done in Nespelem were originally promised to Washington State College for their archives.\(^\text{130}\) Somehow, the more than eighty drawings Still made on the reservation remained in his estate. Possibly, Still saw the quality of the work as sub-par and was concerned that the work would be distributed or publicly displayed, which is clearly not the case as the drawings were preserved as part of his estate for many decades. Certainly, Still’s

drawings from the 1920s, of similar aesthetic merit, could have been kept as part of the estate to provide a background for the many paintings that spoke to the significance of his childhood. Still was determined to maintain a comprehensive breadth within his oeuvre, maintaining early studies and sketches perhaps as evidence of the development of his work. Thus, Still’s time on the reservation and the subsequent drawings must have meant something more to him beyond existing as evidence of artistic skill. The large volume, descriptive quality, and the mere survival of the images made during on the Colville Reservation suggests not only did Clyfford Still feel a deep sympathy or respect for his subjects, like the people homesteading in the Albertan plains, but also, the cultural intricacies of the Native population resonated with the artist on a spiritual level.

Admittedly, it is uncertain the extent of Still’s knowledge about the Native culture of the region. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the tribal beliefs of the area sheds light on the types of interactions Still likely had, which is confirmed by several passages in his journal. The similarities between Still’s own philosophical outlook and the Native religious beliefs are striking. The 1930s saw a renewed professionalism in American anthropology as the field consolidated its image as both an academic field and a valuable occupation; as one anthropological historian recalls, the practice was “intimately connected with the study of the Native American”.131 On a regional level, the 1930s saw for the first time serious studies of the Native plateau cultures of Washington. Particularly, in 1935 (a year before Still’s time on the reservation), the highly influential anthropologist, Leslie Spier, published a document on the religious beliefs of the plateau tribes entitled *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives: The Source of the* 

Spier, who was living in Seattle until the early 1930s, did much of his fieldwork in the 1920s after studying under Franz Boaz at Columbia University; Spier moved to the West Coast to study Native Americans, the vogue topic at the time, on which he wrote a variety of papers and books. The *Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives* provided a rudimentary glimpse into the proliferation of the ghost dance practiced by many tribes and how this dance was an extension of a fundamental set of religious beliefs held by the Natives of the region.

Documented by Spier in the early twentieth century, these unique religious beliefs grew from the political turmoil within the plateau tribes during the nineteenth century. By the mid-1800s, Christian missionaries had been attempting to proselytize the Native population of the Northwest and were met with reasonable success. However, with the mass displacement and widespread abuse of Native Americans by white settlers mid-century, the compulsory religious revitalization swept the plateau tribes, causing many violent outbreaks between whites and Native Americans. The Yakima religious leader who claimed to be the prophet of this new religion was named Smohalla, and his followers, were collectively called “dreamers”. One historian describes the phenomenon, “…one of them [the Yakimas] was to have a great influence on the way of

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132 M Gidley, *With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century*, 37.
135 M Gidley, *With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century*, 32.
137 M Gidley, *With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century*, 37.
life of- and the course of events for- many Northwest Indians. His name was Smohalla, and he was a prophet. There had been some tradition of messianic cults among most Northwest Indian peoples, but Smohalla was exceptionally effective in transmitting his particular version; it spread like a profound religious revival...Smohalla dreamed and he encouraged others to do so.” 138 As Leslie Spier would observe in the early twentieth century, Smohalla’s vision grew and became absorbed by many tribes as the standard religious observance in direct opposition to Christianity, which was still practiced devoutly by some tribes, like the Okanogan. 139 Furthermore, this spiritual framework would influence the way in which much of the Northwestern Native history would transpire in the late nineteenth century.

Smohalla was born to the Wanapams of coastal Washington sometime between 1815 and 1820. 140 The nineteenth century saw great unrest for the tribes of the Northwest as white settlers began to move West to homestead. Historians, Ruby and Brown, describe the spiritual turmoil, which paralleled the physical displacement and conflict many tribes experienced, “In those changing times traditional shamans had little chance of retaining their former status, for on the heels of the missionaries came settlers, and traditional shamans could no longer meet the threat [to the culture] that they posed.” 141 The 1830s and 1840s felt a sort of religious vacuum, a yearning for a spiritual leader with a doctrine of uniquely Native roots. Smohalla was knowledgeable of both Christian and Native religious doctrines, having been educated through a Catholic ministry and coming

138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
141 Ibid, 20.
from a long line of traditional shamans. The Dreamer religion, harmonizing the
traditional practices with the new, fulfilled a spiritual need.

The Dreamer religion was founded primarily on a fundamental post-apocalyptic
scenario. According to Leslie Spier, the fundamental parable was as follows:

“It was held that a terrible convulsion of nature would destroy the world, when
the Creator would restore the halcyon days of long ago and bring the dead to
earth. A strict adherence to Indian dress and modes of life, and an upright life was
enjoined on all true believers, for only such would participate in the final
resurrection. In this rendering of the ancient doctrine, however, emphasis was laid
on active animus toward the whites and their ways…the whole point of the event
was the destruction of the whites. Even the Earth-woman doctrine was taken so
literally that no interference with her was permitted: there should be no parceling
of the land and above all no tilling of the soil.”

Smohalla’s “vision”, thus, was of an earth of solely Native inhabitants purged of white-
imped prejudice, essentially a utopian return to pre-“manifest destiny” times. Leslie
Spier qualifies the phenomenon as a sort of “religious syncretism” whereby Christian and
Native religious beliefs comingle and blend to become a new system of beliefs.

What coincides with Still’s own spiritualism is the emphasis on the purity of earth, precluded
from the blemish of agricultural activity. Smohalla once said:

“My young men shall never work. Men who work cannot dream; and wisdom
comes to us in dreams. You ask me to plough the ground! Shall I take a knife and
tear my mother’s breast? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to
rest. You ask me to dig for stone? Shall I dig under her skin for bones? Then
when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again. You ask me to cut grass and
make hay and sell it and be rich like white men! But how dare I cut off my
mother’s hair?”

142 Ibid.
143 Leslie Spier, The Prophet Dances of the Northwest and Its Derivatives: The Source of
144 Ibid, 40.
145 M Gidley, With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the
Century, 37.
Smohalla’s provocative rhetoric demonstrates how easily the religious phenomenon replaced what traditional Christian values (or lack thereof) were held. The emphasis on maintaining a nomadic lifestyle, one which avoids permanent settlement and the cultivation of crops, would become a historically contentious point mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{146} The Yakima “Dreamer-Prophet”, Kotiakan, worked closely with Smohalla to both spread the Dreamer ideology and bolster its ceremonial manifestations.\textsuperscript{147} Leslie Spier attributes the anti-white sentiments inherent to the Dreamer philosophy to the violence seen between Natives and the U.S. government during this time, such as the Nez Perce War and the Bannock War.\textsuperscript{148} Some even suggest the religion played a role in the 1856 Yakima War.\textsuperscript{149} The commonality between these incidents, though they occurred in different geographic locations and among different tribes, is the conflict between the U.S. military and the Native tribes, reacting to the anti-white sentiment symptomatic of the Dreamer ideology. Many of Natives resisted being relocated to a reservation, and others instigated skirmishes with the hope of re-possessing old tribal lands.\textsuperscript{150} Regardless, the Dreamer religion was not only a widespread belief system by the turn of the century, but also, it played an important role in shaping the relationship between the Native population and the white population in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The Dreamer religion survived into the twentieth century; Leslie Spier confirms that the religion “flourished among most, if not all, of the Sahaptian tribes (explicitly


\textsuperscript{148} See note 51.

\textsuperscript{149} See note 49.

\textsuperscript{150} See note 50.
Umatilla, Walla-Walla, Yakima, Warm Springs, Nez Percé, as and among the mixed group around Priest Rapids). Still encountered primarily Sahaptian-speaking tribes, specifically the Yakima and Nez Perce. Clues from Still’s diary indicate the Natives he encountered ascribed to the faith also. Still writes:

“...The town awaits the big reunion on the 3rd of July. Stories of these people are infinite as are their relatives and in-laws. ‘Underneath they resent the whites’. But they are alert, aggressive, cooperative, clean, and to us have been quite cordial thus far...The oldsters speak English but we let them ‘work’ in their own tongue. Our interpreter a Yakima speaks the six languages of the district. Moses, Nez Perce and Yakima being the most common. Soon intermarriage and English will destroy the few tongues left. Tents and small shacks are scattered here and there throughout the land but one can’t think of them as houses. To the Indian they are stopping places--he lives out-doors.”

Many aspects of this passage allude to a Dreamer practice. First, the reunion on July 3rd, a tradition on the Colville Reservation to which Still refers, attracts many neighboring tribes from around to the reservation to gather and perform ceremonial dances of Dreamer origins. Second is, of course, Still’s indication of the anti-white sentiment, which pervaded Native culture due to the widespread practice of the Dreamer religion and its subsequent violent historical events. Finally, the passage alludes to the adherence to traditional practices, which was so emphasized by Smohalla. Still mentions the Natives “...‘work’ in their own tongue”, which the primary language, given by the list of tribes Still indicates, would be Sahaptian-related to the Dreamers. Additionally, Still highlights the nomadic tendencies of the residents of Nespelem, specifically their desire to live outdoors rather than settle permanently. This may also suggest a religious

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151 Ibid, 46.
152 Passage from Clyfford Still's journal, June, 1936. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum Archives.
adherence to tradition despite the inability of the tribal members to entirely revert back to older nomadic practices.

Furthermore, drawings and notes suggest Still witnessed a Dreamer prophetic ceremony during his time on the reservation. The Dreamer’s post-apocalyptic vision of the dead returning to a “pure” earth was effectuated through a ritualistic Prophet dance, which was practiced into the twentieth century. Older religious ceremonies predicate certain aspects of the ritual, including the use of a drum. As one scholar writes, “The ceremonies which Smohalla’s ‘dreamers’ participated in varied from tribe to tribe and changed slightly over the years, but they nearly always involved drumming and testimony…At the turn of the century on the Colville Reservation there were many dreamers…” Though the drumming was derivative of more ancient traditions, the newer Dreamer ceremony often took place on a Sunday morning and was integrated into the remnants of a particular tribe’s ceremonial calendar. Spier cites a description of the ceremony from the late 19th century:

“‘At irregular intervals, probably six or eight times during the year, either the chief or some other prominent man, having dreamed, stood in the centre of the village and announced in a loud voice that on a certain day he wished the people to assemble at his house…On the appointed day men and women tied a few eagle down-feathers in their hair…[Having invited the people to sing a song with him] He beat his drum and began to sing and to dance up and down…After this song he spoke again: ‘I dreamed that a person spoke to me, saying, ‘You must tell these people to try to do right and to be careful in whatever they do. Teach them this and tell them this.’ He continued in this strain, the people giving close attention, for they had great confidence in dreams…Having finished his exhortation, he

154 Ibid.
155 M Gidley, With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century, 37.
156 Robert H. Ruby, and John A. Brown, Dreamer-Prophets of the Columbia Plateau: Smohalla and Skolaskin, 21-23.
struck the drum and began to sing, and the people danced up and down, or in whatever manner the dreamer might direct…”  

Based on the description above, certain aspects of Still’s drawings indicate the artist may have witnessed a prophetic “ghost dance” ceremony. Still drew a portrait of Lige Williams who was the great-grandson of Chief Joseph, head of the famous ragtag clan of Nez Perce. One of the more well known groups of Dreamers, Chief Joseph and his tribe fought in the New Perce War of 1877 against the US military to maintain their nomadic lifestyle and homelands. Still inscribes a small note at the bottom of Williams’ portrait, PD-84 1936 (Figure 11), which reads “Lige Williams, Head dancer, 6/27/36, Nesp. WA”. Wearing a traditional beaded headband and ermine neck cuff, Williams could have acted as the Dreamer, instigator of the prophetic drum ceremony as described in Spier’s book. Still would have denoted this position possibly as “head dancer”.

Likewise, on the back of a drawing, PDX-11 1936 (Figure 12), Still describes a “war dance” with a few scribbled studies, doing small studies of tribal members dancing to the beat of a large drum. PP-494 1936 (Figure 13) also hints at the possibility of Still witnessing one of these ceremonies. The central figure of PP-494 sits before a drum specific to the prophet dance. Spier describes it in detail: “The hand-drum was widely known throughout the Northwest Coast and Plateau…The hand-drum is…circular,

159 M Gidley, With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century, 40.
shallow…having but one face…” In PP-494, a one-faced drum is featured prominently; the central figure seated before the drum appears to be brightly dressed for a ceremony. These drawings in conjunction with other notes from Still’s diary verify the artist’s exposure to Dreamer religious ceremony and believers, having likely witnessed a prophetic ceremony firsthand.

Still would once say, “I’m not interested in illustrating my time. A man’s ‘time’ limits him, it does not truly liberate him. Our age— it is of science—of power and death.” Indeed, Still worked tirelessly to ensure his artwork was considered without historical influences, free of time and place. The artist’s careful control of his estate, particularly his editing for content, makes it extremely difficult to determine exactly what role certain experiences in his life played. However, some of Still’s writings from the time suggest the artist felt a deep sympathy for the people of the Colville Reservation. Whether or not Still was fully aware of the acute similarities between his own pessimism, formed from his childhood experiences, and the Dreamer religion remains tenuous; however, what notes and drawings that do remain from this time suggest in terms of both quality and quantity a profound interest in the Native culture of the area. The next chapter will survey the extent of Still’s personal connection to the Native people, its manifestations in his work, and how this experience fits within the broader historical phenomenon of primitivism.

Diver

Figure 1, Clyfford Still, PD-77, 1936. Graphite on paper, 8 3/4 x 6 in. (22.2 x 15.2 cm) Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 2, Clyfford Still, PD-53, 1936. Graphite on paper, 9 x 6 1/2 in. (22.9 x 16.5 cm) Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 3, Clyfford Still, PD-54, 1936. Graphite on paper, 11 x 8 ½ in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm)
Photo: Gary Regester. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 4, Clyfford Still, PP-241, 1936. Pastel on paper, 12 ¼ x 9 ¾ in. (31.1 x 24.7 cm)
Photo: Gary Regester. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 5, Clyfford Still, PDX-15, 1936. Graphite on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm) Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 6, Clyfford Still, PD-100, 1936. Graphite on paper, 6 x 8 5/8 in. (15.2 x 21.9 cm) Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 7, Clyfford Still, PD-55, 1936. Graphite on paper, 12 x 9 1/2 in. (30.5 x 24.1 cm) Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 8, Teepees in a field, Photograph by Clyfford Still, 1936 © Clyfford Still Museum Archives

Figure 9, Clyfford Still, PDX-3, 1936. Graphite on paper, 9 x 12 in. (22.9 x 30.5 cm) Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 10, Clyfford Still, PDX-4, 1936. Graphite on paper, 9 x 12 in. (22.9 x 30.5 cm)
Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 11, Clyfford Still, PD-84, 1936. Graphite on paper, 12 x 9 in. (30.5 x 22.9 cm)
Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 12, Clyfford Still, PDX-11 (verso), 1936. Graphite on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm) © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 13, Clyfford Still, PP-494, 1936. Pastel on paper, 9 x 12 in. (22.9 x 30.5 cm) Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Chapter 4: Still, Shamanism, and Primitivism

Chapter 3 demonstrated the degree to which Clyfford Still was aware of the cultural practices of the region, particularly certain aspects of the Dreamer religion as instituted by the prophet, Smohalla. Now that these encounters have been made clearer, this chapter will first examine how the philosophical undertones of Still’s writing parallel the Dreamer ideology. The mythic nuances of Still’s work, beginning as studious realistic portraiture and landscapes, becomes more developed in later works. Then, examining how this discovery fits with previous scholarship will solidify both how this experience manifested itself in Still’s later work in addition to the broader art historical implications of Still’s time on the Colville Reservation.

From his diary written during his time on the reservation, Still reflected on the living situation of the inhabitants:

“...The huts we visited were not dirty, merely wretchedly impoverished. Barren, unkempt, yet swept -- smelling of mold, mice and tobacco as of the shacks uninhabited...I shivered when I remembered the winters to be endured in them. Beds, a few blankets askew and a huge straw, or feather, ‘tick’ under which the kiddies crawled of nights. A stove, a table, an old dresser and a few wrecks of chains plus some baskets and ‘cut-out’ pictures the kiddies made at school--that was all. Yes, here and there a bear-skin and smashed, rep curtains fluttering through broken panes--but no handiwork at all! ...the end has come --why think of anything? ...Weary helpless ghosts of a forgotten past. $15,000,000 of forest wealth-and the “ancients” get $2.50 per month on which to live. Thousands of acres of...fertile valleys and only a hoe to work there. The stores have caught all the stray stock and implements on the foreclosure route. And the ‘whites’ won’t work the land in a three year lease!”

The passage demonstrates a curious juxtaposition of his own memories of his childhood with an ideology similar to the Dreamer religion. He refers to the impoverished huts as clean despite being barren, shuddering to imagine the cold winter months spent in the

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162 Passage from Clyfford Still's journal, June, 1936. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum Archives.
tiny shacks. Still uses the word “remember” to describe his idea of how cold the winters are, indicative of a recollection of his own experiences. Recalling the apocalyptic visions of Smohalla, the artist writes, “The end has come.” Demonstrating his knowledge of agriculture and land leasing, Still sympathetically relates the impossibility of working the land given to the tribes of the reservation, a principal feature of the Dreamer belief set. Still even continues on to describe the Natives as “weary helpless ghosts of a forgotten past”, and like the Dreamer end times, the dead and living roam the earth. Yet, the word “helpless” implies a child-like or powerless state, a vestige of the historical image of Native peoples as incapable. He remarks how he is surprised there is no handiwork, which suggests Still assumes handiwork is a requisite of cultural permanence.

Most revealing within the passage, thus, is Still’s hybrid perspective, reflecting both on his own experiences of destitution and his sympathy for the Native’s similar plight. The extent to which Still was aware of the philosophical tenants of the Dreamer religion is unclear; however, his profound empathy for the Native people, born from his own childhood traumas, emulates distinctive attributes key to the Dreamer belief system—specifically the worship of untouched land.

In an article on the Clyfford Still Museum’s opening, David Anfam commented in Art in America, “There was a lot of talk about the influence of Native American art on Abstract Expressionism, but you don’t ever see any actual depictions of Native Americans…Still’s direct contact with shamanistic culture influenced how he expressed spirituality through primitive and abstract forms.”\textsuperscript{163} Anfam and other scholars continually acknowledge the rich influence of Native cultures on Still’s work, always

\textsuperscript{163} Sheets, Hilarie M. "Clyfford Still, Unpacked." Art in America, November 2011, 126.
speaking in terms of a broad “Native” spirituality. However, never before has Still’s interaction been closely examined and the cultural elements identified. A more intimate study of Still’s time in Nespelem reveals that the unique culture of Washington’s Plateau tribes paralleled, and perhaps, became integrated within the artist’s portrayal of mysticism and spirituality. Just as Smohalla was a prophet advocating for the purity of the landscape, perhaps Still saw himself as a shaman, a sort of timeless magician. In 1941, Still claimed his work revealed “overtones of man’s struggle against and fusing with nature.”

This unique connection to the land, shared by many of the Colville Reservation’s inhabitants, becomes the central foundation for Still’s work following the summer of 1936.

The artist’s experience at Nespelem can be appreciated in numerous aspects of his work of the late 1930s and 1940s. On the most basic level, Still’s detailed notes on color at the reservation would inform the palette in the later works. The color of the 1936 drawings stands out to Anfam: “Lilac, crimson, leaf green, and the like accent the gray or black pencil/crayon strokes on the off-white paper. The drawings evince a careful attention to detail, refine a colorism… and contribute to what will become the chromatic organization of the 1940s paintings. By then, miniscule brilliant flashes punctuate big dark fields or bare canvases.” The vibrant colors of the Nespelem drawings anticipate the surprising elements of brilliant primary colors or streaks of gentle pastels characteristic of Still’s work for the rest of his career. The paintings of the early 1940s demonstrate this “colorism”, as in PH-350 1943 (Figure 1, also reproduced in Chapter 2).

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165 Ibid, 83.
The black and white ambiguously positive and negative space is accented in this work by the rising forms of yellow, green, and red. The vibrancy of color can also be observed in earlier works from the later 1930s, like PH-344 1937 (Figure 2). Unlike the muddied oils on windowshade made in Saratoga Springs the year before, the artist employs a rich and bold palette of primary colors to describe the crouching male and female pair, a sensibility unique to Still’s work made after 1936.

The artist’s familiarity with the Plateau cultures can be seen beyond aesthetic tendencies in his work. Also closely connected to Still’s experience on the reservation are the philosophical underpinnings of his work proceeding 1936. Still would write for his first exhibition in Buffalo:

“For it was never a problem of aesthetics, or public or private acceptance, that determined my responsibility to the completed work. Rather, it was the hope to make clear its conceptual germination of idea and vision...It was a journey one must make, walking straight and alone. And one’s will had to hold against every challenge of triumph, or failure, or the praise of Vanity Fair. Until one had crossed the darkened wasted valleys and come at last into clear air and could stand on a high and limitless plain. Imagination, no longer fettered by the laws of fear, became as one with Vision.”

166 Like Still, the Dreamers of the Columbia River Valley place importance on visions informed by the spiritual connection to the land. Here, Still mentions a “responsibility” to the work, and most importantly, the mysterious “conceptual germination of idea and vision”. The artist frequently remarks on the totality of his “vision”, namely this conceptual framework; however, he never blatantly explains his ideation to which he so frequently refers. Yet, the metaphor of the “wasted valleys” serves as a clue. The notion of landscape as metaphor has been a commonly explored theme since the Romantic

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period, and here, like the Yakima and other tribes of the Washington Plateaus, Still imagines a sort of freedom and purity of thought which exists in the plains.\textsuperscript{167} The artist’s interest in planarity could also be interpreted as a metaphor for landscape, as his characteristic abstract works encompass the viewer’s vision in a sublime plain of color and texture, like PH-235 1945 (Figure 10 in Chapter 2).

Clyfford Still’s exposure to Native culture provides further insight into and supports Anfam’s original investigation into the role of myth in Still’s work in relation to Harrison’s \textit{Themis}.\textsuperscript{168} Still’s interest in myth, particularly ghostly figures, appears in the works following his time in Nespelem. Anfam identifies a passage from \textit{Themis}, which discusses “spectres” or ghosts.\textsuperscript{169} Still used the title, “The Spectre and the Perroquet”, antiquated names for a ghostly figure and a parakeet, both referenced in Harrison’s chapter on ghosts.\textsuperscript{170} Though it is impossible to determine when Still read Harrison’s work, the work’s overarching interest in the cyclic nature of agriculture as it pertains to myth complements the beliefs of the Dreamer religion among Washington’s Plateau tribes, where the post-apocalyptic premise of their dead ancestors rising from the grave to join the living was so deeply engrained in their culture. Also, centered around this image of rising spirits is the notion of verticality, essential to Still’s work. The vertical literally invokes the position of the living, but also, refers to a sense of independence, as Still

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid, 585.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
writes “a journey one must make, walking straight and alone.” Walking, living, and journeying are necessarily vertical actions. Similarly, Smohalla and his Dreamers felt impelled to work against a “system”, the government, for control of their homelands, an act of autonomy or independence. Still also claims to be beholden to a “Vision”. In the same way, a singular vision, the dead rising, compels the Sahaptian tribes to perform the prophetic ghost dance ceremony.

Anfam sums up the seminal period of the late 1930s and 1940s, “It is a ‘strange phantom crew’ of half-human creatures, or ‘daimons’, who gravitate between earth and sky and are imbued with the uncanny. There is the domain of totemism, tabu, animism, petrification, and a hidden life force called ‘Wa-koń-da’ by American Indians.” Anfam points to a variety of themes certainly present in Still’s work; however, a deeper understanding of Native beliefs, particularly the Dreamer religion of which the artist had first-hand experience, provides a richer context to understand the works from this time. 

Wa-koń-da is in fact a Navajo word, a tribe non-aboriginal to the Northwest, and it would be unlikely Still would have knowledge of such an esoteric Native belief though there is an undeniable link between Still’s interest in myth and its presentation in Themis. The “animism” and the “hidden life force” which Anfam identifies in Still’s work are more likely derivative of the Yakima and other tribes’ religious beliefs, which the artist experienced first hand. The sense of verticality as a metaphor for independence and the

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171 See note 5
172 See note 166.
landscape as abstract metaphor for a singular “vision”, shared by the Dreamers of the Columbia River Valley, are visually apparent in Still’s work preceding abstraction in the early 1940s, and more specifically, locate these elements of Still’s work as uniquely belonging to that region. PH-210 1942 (Figure 3) combines many of the aforementioned elements. A rich palette of an earthy mud color, black, and white are accented by ghostly linear streaks of orange and red. An orange halo, like a small sun, clings to the black vertical line descending from above. The intersecting forms outlined and heightened by vibrant colorful accents creates an overall feeling of mystery, like the endless expanse of a “high plain” or the appearance of a ghostly mist rising from the earth. Stemming from his own experience on Bow Island, on a basic level, Still feels a spiritual connection to the land parallel to the tribes of the plateaus.

Like the homesteaders of his youth, Still understands the Natives as in a similarly heartbreaking plight, the losers of an endless fight against the impenetrable forces of nature. Still reflects more on this parallel in his diary written during his time in Nespelem. This entry dates to June 20, 1936:

“By treating them with dignity and as equals and giving them time to think things over we have not had a single refusal from these Indians, man, woman, or child. In fact they have frequently agreed to work again, jested with us -- well, we are beginning to like them in spite of the luscious hate -- murder tales we hear. Thare [spelling error- presumably ‘they’re’] a lot of fun and colorful to the limit--a beautiful--tragic people.”

The last entry from his diary on the subject, the brief paragraph above sheds light on both Still’s surprise to encounter friendliness and his appreciation of the rich character of the tribal members. Despite the inherent prejudice against the Native population at the time (“murder tales”), Still discovers both beauty and tragedy in the people of the reservation.

175 Passage from Clyfford Still's journal, June, 1936.Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum Archives.
It is in fact this duality, which remains crucial to appreciating Still’s attitude towards his Native subjects. There exists both a romanticization and a perceived subordination of the Native culture in Still’s writings; the artist identifies with their situation, but also, understands himself as culturally and intellectually superior.

This antithetical relationship between artist and Native subject, however, is not unique to Clyfford Still’s artistic development. Native American cultures intrigued numerous Modern artists, particularly Abstract Expressionists from Still’s peer group, though few had quite as close contact with contemporary Native peoples as Still. Historically, the phenomenon of Modern European or American artists “borrowing” either aesthetically or ideologically from peripheral cultures has been termed Primitivism, a concept stemming from the notion of a “primitive” culture, separate from the dominant Western culture. “Primitive” and “Primitivism” will be used for the purposes of this analysis, as it is unique to the time period discussed, though the term is contentious. To describe cultures as “primitive”, of course, suggests a child-like or fundamental state, inferior to another more “developed” culture. This nineteenth century term describes the cultures of Africa, Oceania, and the Native cultures of North and South America primarily; however, artists similarly viewed the primitive minds of peasants, the insane, and children as possessing a equitable naïveté.

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177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
This notion of development versus simplicity, Western versus non-Western, stems directly from the notion of Otherness. The Other is simply understood to be a person of another culture operating outside the perceived accepted cultural practice.\(^{180}\) The connotation of Otherness is the constructed hierarchal position of white or “Western” culture as superior to the aforementioned cultures.\(^{181}\) Historian, Jack Flam, describes the phenomenon, “Because Primitive art was held to have had no history, it appeared to confirm widely held beliefs about the immutability and universality of great art. Visibly, Primitive art offered an alternative to the naturalistic representation of the world and suggested new and imaginative ways of conceiving and organizing forms in accordance with abstract ideas.”\(^{182}\) Primitivism as a phenomenon within visual culture, thus, was not only derivative of a patronizing viewpoint of other cultures by dominant cultural artistic practitioners, but grew from a serious formalism or aesthetic appreciation of the objects from these other cultures.

The advent of Primitivism essentially coincided with the initiation of colonialism as Western European cultures encountered other cultures as their enterprises expanded in the nineteenth century.\(^{183}\) Unlike other more organized artistic movements, Primitivism cannot be associated with any particular style or group of artists. Instead, Primitivism can

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\(^{183}\) Ibid, 14.
be described as “the context of artists’ various reactions to ideas of the primitive...”\textsuperscript{184}

The notion of Primitivism has changed since its inception in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, as artists understand primitive cultures through multiple lenses- both conceptual and aesthetic.\textsuperscript{185} The term “primitive” denotes, as described by historian Colin Rhodes, “someone or something less complex, or less advanced, than the person or thing to which it is being compared”.\textsuperscript{186} With the expansion of the British, Dutch, and other European empires, many Europeans grasped for a logical explanation for the exploitation of other people.\textsuperscript{187} Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory, applied to the hierarchy of human interaction by Haeckel and Spencer, developed into a “social Darwinism”; whereby, the colonizers thought of themselves as deserving of the right to exploit others due to the inferiority or inability of the exploited prevent the occurrence.\textsuperscript{188} Likewise, the notion that the “savages” who inhabited these distinct regions were intellectually children became part of popular thought.\textsuperscript{189} Thus, inherent to the mindset of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is the perceived intellectual and cultural inferiority of the African, Native American, and Oceanic cultures.\textsuperscript{190} Yet, also with colonialism came the exposure to non-Western cultures, which sparked the interest of artists and anthropologists alike for many decades. Rhodes comments, “There is a fascination with

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid, 7.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid, 14.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid, 17.
‘exotic’ subjects, as in Orientalist painting, from the nineteenth century to Matisse and after”.\(^{191}\) Though Primitivism owes its roots to Orientalists, like Jean-Léon Gérôme, it remains distinctly separate.\(^{192}\) Orientalism is a product of the 19\(^{th}\) century academic painting; whereas, Primitivism reacted specifically against this type of practice by studying the representational modalities of other cultures.\(^{193}\)

Examples within the European canon are numerous. Most famously, Gauguin worked in the South Pacific and the Caribbean, painting the exotic women and scenery.\(^{194}\) However, other early twentieth century groups also looked to peripheral cultures for visual inspiration, similarly romanticizing the culture from which certain objects originated.\(^{195}\) Generally speaking, these artists sought to depict the imagined ease of life and simplicity of the primitive mind they perceived. For example, the Neo-Primitivists of Russia and the Blue Rider group focused on the crafts of the regional rural population as examples of returning to what is supposedly more basic.\(^{196}\) The early moments of Primitivism were primarily focused on the visual interpretation of crafts, as Rhodes claims, “…by virtue of their physical appearance”.\(^{197}\) From the early 1900s forward, artists, like Picasso and Cézanne, and German Expressionists, like Kirchner and Pechstein, looked to primitive sources for new ways of reinventing and revolting against

\(^{192}\) Ibid, 76.
\(^{193}\) Ibid.
\(^{194}\) Ibid, 59.
\(^{195}\) See note 26.
\(^{197}\) Ibid, 107.
traditional means of composition. Artists, though still not entirely interested nor concerned with the social function of primitive objects, sought to find “freer” means of expression by emulating the representational modalities of other cultures. Rhodes elaborates, “Artists went to primitive art expecting to find in it qualities that they presumed to be absent in contemporary European art…and intuitive and expressionist creative method…” Cubism, as an example, made more basic the means by which to describe the visual, attempting to replicate the abstraction of the face as seen in African sources. For example, Picasso, most famously in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, looked to African masks as a way of reinterpreting the depiction of the figure through the use of planes.

Occurring nearly concurrently, following World War I, were the Dada and Surrealist groups of the early twentieth century. Began around 1924, the Surrealists, informed by Freudian psychology, further expanded the modes of art production by searching the primitive mind and unconsciousness actions. The perceived “freedom” of the non-socialized or uncivilized mind interested Surrealists, who juxtaposed incongruent images to attempt to delve into the subconscious. On the other hand, the Dadaists melded primitive imagery among a variety of other sources to renew the trite aesthetic

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200 Ibid, 90.
202 Ibid.
sensibilities of post-World War I Europe. The American resurgence of Primitivism also was born out the aftermath of the First World War though some may argue Primitivist tendencies did not emerge until later, as American art was not considered the forefront of contemporaneity at the time. The American reaction to European influence manifested itself as a newfound interest in Native American art and culture. Jack Flam writes, “Until the 1940s, Americans were themselves considered to be outside the metropolitan center of art production, and Primitive art often came to them filtered through a European sensibility. Americans were at once admiring of European art and trying to distance themselves from it in order to forge an independent artistic identity. In order to do this, American artists and writers frequently turned to American Indian art, finding in it a model that was quintessentially American while being in touch with the same primordial feelings that were associated with Primitive art in general.” Indeed, the nationalist attitudes, which fueled the worldwide violence of the early twentieth century, spurned American artists to discover a purely American aesthetic. This inclination took the form of American Scene Painting early on; however, as Native American culture was further understood due to an increase in scholarly anthropological work, artists continued to delve into and borrow from Native culture, both visually and conceptually. Europe was wrought again with political tensions into the 1930s, which coupled with the first exhibitions of Native American art as aesthetic rather than

204 Ibid. 
206 Ibid. 
anthropological objects. The attitude towards Natives in the 1930s and 1940s was a contradictory stance, both reverential and subordinating. Curated by the painter, John Sloan, and the anthropologist, Oliver Lafarge, the catalogue for the first traveling exhibition of Native arts entitled the *Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts* in 1931 reveals this perspective, “The Indian is a born artist; possessing a capacity for discipline and careful work, and a fine sense of line and rhythm, which seems to be inherent in the Mongoloid peoples. He has evolved for himself during many thousands of years a form and content peculiarly his own. We white Americans have been painfully slow to realize the Indian’s value to us and to the world as an independent artist…” Though Sloan’s stance is complimentary of the Native artist, his perspective is situated on the notion of the “Other”. As in Still’s diary entries, Sloan expresses a sympathy for and admiration of the Native artist; however, his compliments revolve around the assumption that Native culture has not been regarded to foster valuable artistic production. Likewise, Sloan, though touting the individualistic Native artist, lumps all tribes into the category of “Mongoloid”, a general, and now outdated, term essentially used to describe anyone who is not of European origin. Sloan’s celebratory yet derogatory comments reveal the commonly held perspective of Native American culture, a perspective repeated in Still’s writings.

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208 Ibid, 16.
209 Ibid.
While Still’s view of his Native subjects certainly places him as a product of the opinion of his time, his paintings and drawings reframe Still more broadly within the canonical tradition of Primitivism, further establishing Still within his own peer group of Abstract Expressionists. Many painters from the New York School owed much to the Surrealists in their development of the abstract as it relates to Primitivism.\footnote{Kirk Varnedoe, "Abstract Expressionism," Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern, volume 2, ed. William Rubin, 615.} Kirk Varnedoe explains, “…Surrealism affected not only the look of the American artists’ primitivism, but also their insistence on a spiritual identification of contemporary artistic ideals with the motivating forces behind the creativity of early man.”\footnote{Ibid.} In some sense, the Abstract Expressionists shared an interest in the automatic method of art production, but more importantly, artists like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Adolph Gottlieb looked to primitive sources for a source of spiritual renewal, artists as shamans of their own time.\footnote{Ibid.} Varnedoe continues, “Identification with the Primitive was a way of claiming for themselves a less arbitrary, timelessly valid, vocabulary of nonrepresentational form- providing their primitivism could at the same time be distanced from what seemed to them a too superficial, merely formal appropriation of tribal art by some European Modernists…these artists’ genuinely felt need for an approach that would be concerned with myth and the religious or magic force of Primitive expression.”\footnote{Ibid, 616.} The perceived timeless and universality of Native American culture likely appealed to Still the same way it appealed to his colleagues. Similarly, the
quest for spiritual reckoning, like the Dreamers of the Columbia River Valley, became a major factor in Still’s artistic production beginning in the 1940s onward.

Adolph Gottlieb summarizes, “That these demonic and brutal images fascinate us today, is not because they are exotic, nor do they make us nostalgic for a past which seems enchanting because of its remoteness. On the contrary, it is the immediacy of their images that draws us irresistibly to the fancies, the superstitions, the fables of savages and the strange beliefs that were so vividly articulated by primitive man.”

Still felt a spiritual connection to the land, like the tribes of the Colville reservation. Comparably, other colleagues of Still’s, many with whom Still had a relationship in the 1940s and early 1950s, were interested in the mythology and spirituality of Native cultures, the “immediacy of their images”. Barnett Newman not only painted and worked from Native sources, but also, was involved in curating numerous exhibitions of Native objects in New York, including *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* (1946).

More famously, Pollock’s style of working with the canvas on the floor can be attributed to his interest in Navajo sand painting. Pollock comments, “On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from four sides and literally be in the painting. This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West.”

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218 Ibid.
experience fits within a well-studied tradition of cross-cultural encounters. Like his colleagues, Still discovers within the Native tradition a new means of envisioning spirituality, which aligned with his own life experiences at that point. The perceived timelessness of Native cultures in addition to the tradition of shamanism appealed to Still; however, cultural prejudices inherently plagued these interactions. Thus, Still’s time in Nespelem can be clearly situated within the context of other Abstract Expressionists, and Primitivism on whole, an immensely complex trend within twentieth century art.
Figure 1, PH-350, 1943, oil on canvas
Clyfford Still, PH-350, 1943. Oil on canvas, 59 ½ x 38 in. (151.3 x 96.5 cm) Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the Clyfford Still Museum © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 2, PH-344, 1937, oil on canvas
Clyfford Still, PH-344, 1937. Oil on canvas, 50 1/4 x 38 1/8 in. (127.6 x 96.8 cm) Photo: Jay Baker © Clyfford Still Estate
Figure 3, PH-210 1942, oil on canvas
Clyfford Still, PH-210, 1942. Oil on cloth, 59 1/2 x 30 in. (151.1 x 76.2 cm) Photo: Jay Baker © Clyfford Still Estate
Conclusion

William Rubin would remark on the study of Primitivism in recent years, “Upon reflection, it is perhaps not surprising that Primitivism has received so little searching consideration, for intelligent discourse on the subject requires some familiarity with both the arts whose intersection in modern Western culture accounts for the phenomenon. The studies of the two have traditionally remained separate. Until fairly recently, tribal objects were largely the preserve, at least in scholarly and museological terms, of ethnologists.”219 The lack of critical scholarship on Clyfford Still’s time on the Colville Reservation has likely been in part both to the unavailability of Still’s works and the challenge of acquiring credible knowledge on the cultural situation of the particular time and place. This thesis clarifies the specific cultural background of the people Still encountered while visiting the Colville Reservation while also attempting to better understand the artist’s view of his Native subjects through his writings, drawings, and photographs.

While this paper does not offer a complete view of how Still’s experience in Nespelem manifested itself in various forms throughout the artist’s lifetime, it does offer a unique perspective of the spiritual and mythological framework of the Colville tribes from which Still was working. The various drawings Still created during his time on the reservation can only be understood in light of the earliest drawings on record made by Still when he was a teenager (1920-1925). The realistic pessimism, namely in the form of an animosity towards agriculture, defines the juvenile drawings of the 1920s, a style

which the artist would not revive until his time on the reservation. This return to realism uniquely frames Still’s works from Colville as both sympathetic renderings of the subject matter and anthropological studies of a particular time and area. Thus, the Nespelem drawings are singularly parallel in Still’s line of thinking to the early drawings of Alberta completed years beforehand and demonstrate their equitable significance to the artist’s succeeding line of work.

It can therefore be assumed because of the sympathetic and detailed nature of Still’s drawings that his experience in Nespelem was one of many factors which shaped the development of Still’s artistic practice. This supports rather than negates previous scholarship on the artist done by David Anfam and others. Examining both Still’s and the Sahaptian tribes’ belief systems clarifies how important shamanism is to Still’s work, a trait identified by Anfam through his work with Harrison’s Themis. Within a broader context, Still’s experience on the reservation can be classified as yet another manifestation of Primitivism within twentieth century art, founded on the premise of subordinating yet revering the “Other”.

It is worth noting this paper only provides a small glimpse of the many, many works on paper made by Still. The historical significance of the entirety of these works remains largely unknown; however, I firmly hope future scholars will endeavor to study the Clyfford Still Museum’s immense collection, which has been an invaluable resource for the completion of this thesis. Future scholarship is essential to achieving a truly multifaceted understanding of Still. Through this thesis, and hopefully prospective works, may the world finally unravel the enigmatic persona of Clyfford Still.
Bibliography


\(^1\) M Gidley, *With One Sky Above Us: Life on an Indian Reservation at the Turn of the Century*, 32.


