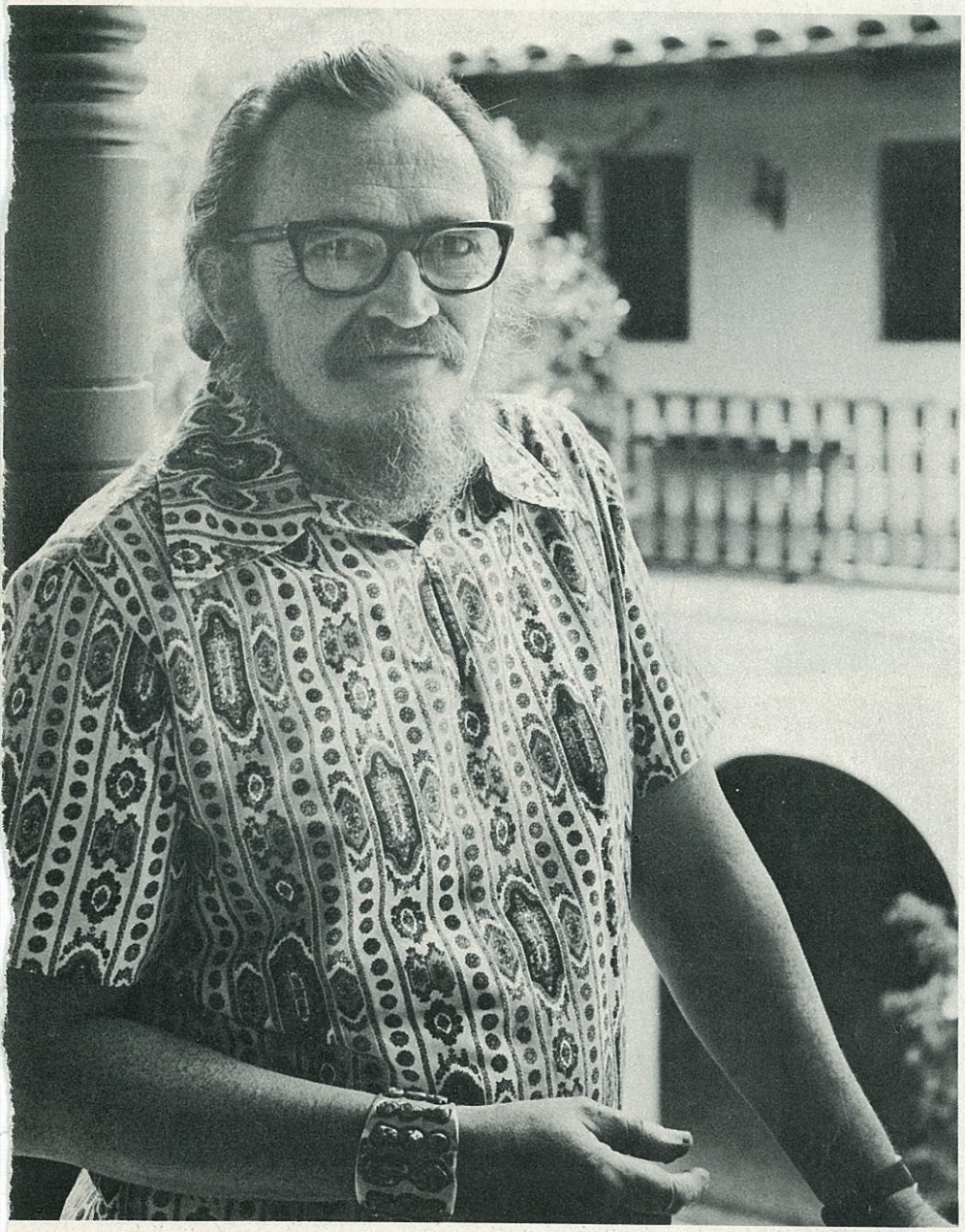
THE NEW INDIAN ART

One artist's account of the struggle for artistic freedom, and the difficulty of loosening the bonds of traditionalism while still retaining his own sense of Indian-ness.

By David Chethlahe Paladin



David Chethlahe Paladin, trained in the Santa Fe School, was one of the first Indian artists to break with tradition, develop an original creativity and individualistic style, while still basing his work on the lore and legends of his Indian ancestry. Of Navajo-Anglo parentage, he was raised on the Navajo Reservation near Paladin mountain. His tribal name — Chethlahe — translates as "Little Turtle Who Cries in the Night". He has been a consistent winner of important awards, including the Carnegie Medal for Achievement in the Arts. Paladin collectors include the governments of the United States, West Germany, Japan, Italy and Austria, museums throughout the country and private collectors around the world.

photo by Neil Koppes

AT ONE TIME or another during the past 45-odd years, I have been a soldier, sailor, shoe salesman, window decorator, radio announcer, plus a few dozen other "things", and not once was the title of any of my careers prefaced with the word "Indian". Admittedly, once or twice I was called "Chief" by my contemporaries, and a few times I was hailed as a "cussed Half Breed" by someone not entirely enchanted with my cultural heritage (or my personality). However, immediately upon embarking upon a career as an artist, that identifying tag (Indian) became mysteriously attached to everything I did. Much to my horror, I also discovered that I somehow had also lost my right to originality of style, along with many other forms of artistic freedom. My heritage had become a proverbial millstone, tying me to a "Tradition" that in some ways was as alien to me as were the traditions of the Hebrew or the African.

Being an "Indian Artist" not only limited freedom of expression, but also limited my access to legitimate art markets. In order to paint I was expected to use those materials acceptable to the few who trafficked in Native Curios, was informed that my "Style" should conform to something called tradition, and was soon to discover that most galleries were not at all interested in my work. "There's a Curio Shop down the road that carries Indian things . . ." became such a familiar statement that at one time I contemplated leaving my familiar haunts in the Southwest in exchange for the anonymity of some large eastern city.

In fact I tried it. What there was of my formal education I had received at the Indian School of Santa Fe, immediately following the era of Dorothy Dunn. The school had been started early in the 1900's. The students there were introduced to what might be termed "easel painting". Supplied with tempera paints, crayons, and an occasional stick of charcoal, the young Indians were urged to create familiar images for the edification of their instructors and a few collectors who became interested in the projected information about religious ceremonies, legends, and the "quaint" primitive

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Paladin painting, "Mythological Personage", derived from the Kiowa legend of half woman, half horse.

qualities of the native American.

This birth of an art movement became a painful one. It worked to restrain individual creativity, as a specific "traditional" style was developed, and it wasn't long before the market for Indian art became so restrictive as to discourage many young, talented Indians. In this situation, unfortunately, it came to be the Indian trader who dictated both style and medium for many years to come. Although they promoted an interest in Indian art, they at the same time were guilty of creating an image that, had it continued, would certainly have relegated all Indian art to the shelves of curio shops and trading posts indefinitely. Many museums followed suit. In order to qualify as "Indian", the artist molded his production to the pre-established "traditional image".

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As for me, after the sixth grade at the Santa Fe School, I had had enough, I ran away, tried bumming around, traveling to different cities, painting on the basis of my training, in a very imitative way.

Advice from two wonderful artists and people helped me find my way. I was a brazen, brash youth in Chicago after World War II when I met Marc Chagall. I wanted to know why he painted those odd goats on rooftops. I felt I was going nowhere trying to imitate the white man's art. He was excited over my Indian background and thought about how I could make Indian folklore contemporary, using it to spark imagination. It was the imitating in Indian art I didn't want, and I didn't get anything out of the Anglo world either. He said to me, "You have this beautiful heritage: tell me some stories." He told me how he would do it. He said he didn't use the pure Hebrew image, but created his own from it. Later on I met Mark Tobey in Portland and he told me a very similar thing, advising me to take Indian legends as a start.

It took me five or six years to get into this. I kept drifting back into the Santa Fe style, considering the trapped market. For

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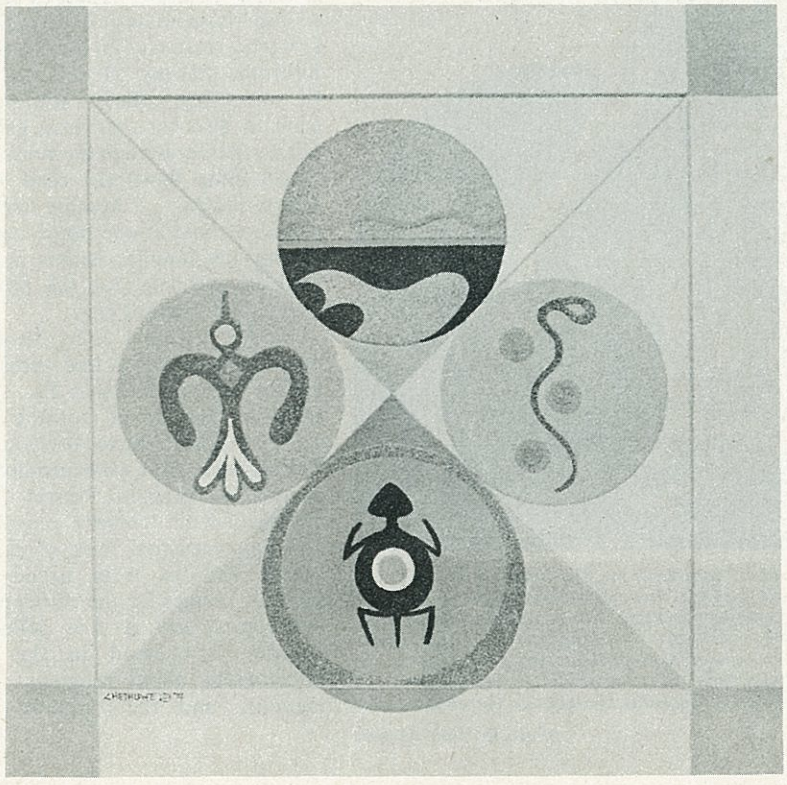

"Four Pueblo Worlds", Paladin sand painting.

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a while I decided to go into radio and forget art, but I found that broadcasting enabled me to survive and paint as I wanted to without worrying about having to sell.

More than likely, I might still have succumbed to this as a way of life, had I not met Paul Huldermann of the House of Six Directions in Scottsdale, who was quite insistent that there was a place in the world for Indian artists who had a desire to push aside the barriers of traditional conformity while still holding on to their sense of Indian-ness. His advice came at a time when many young Indian artists faced the same dilemma as I did, and I certainly credit him with inspiring many of us to persevere at all costs. He gave us the encouragement necessary for the establishment of a new "school" of Indian art, one in which we could and would explore our previously denied creativity in his work as director of the newly established Scottsdale National Indian Arts Exhibition.

It was this exhibition which created a much needed showcase for all Indian artists. Those who chose the more traditional concepts were also given a greater opportunity to gain recognition, and Indian art began to take its rightful place on the American scene. A movement which had blossomed and was dying came to life.

In this way young Indians were encouraged to explore new and unusual materials. Today no medium is scorned as the Indian artist experiments, becomes skilled in lithography, etching, sculpture and even some of the more conceptual media. The American Southwest has become a center for the display of these results, with Scottsdale and Phoenix taking an easy lead. In spite of the recession, American Indian art is meeting an increasingly larger and more appreciative audience.

Admittedly, there had been a certain degree of fad-ism involved in the skyrocketing Indian market. However, it is now quite evident that the rising stars on this scene have established themselves well enough to insure continuance of their success, and not only for themselves but those who are just appearing. Art journals, worldwide, are reporting that the value of quality Indian art is not only holding its own, but insures the wise collector of unique investment potential.

While some decry the new movement as destructive of ancient and sacred tradition, they must somehow be made to recognize that if art is to become great, it must be allowed the freedom to evolve. The Indian artist of today does more than "preserve" his culture, he enhances it with all of his creative ability. That is his stock, trade and inalienable right. ●

COVER:
The beauty of an Arizona desert springtime was captured on film by photographer Neil Koppes.

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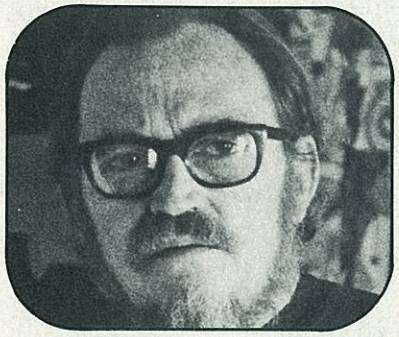

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